MURAJ
Minnesota Undergraduate Research & Academic Journal
z.umn.edu/MURAJ

We Come Late, Late We Come: The National Council of Churches in the Civil Rights Movement

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Abstract: The National Council of Churches (NCC) was established in 1950 as an ecumenical organization for Protestant churches across the United States to exchange dialogue and work together, especially in response to the Civil Rights Movement. Its leaders intended to use the moral authority held by churches in their communities to encourage white Americans to embrace integration and condemn racism. The NCC had several devoted leaders and members who achieved symbolic victories, like sending a delegation to the March on Washington, and tangible victories, like organizing Midwestern churchgoers to persuade their congressmen to pass the Civil Rights Act. These actions, while substantial, were overshadowed by inertia, inconsistent messaging, and ideological moderation throughout the organization's majority white membership. These traits were due in large part to the NCC's inability to reckon with white Protestantism's long history of racism in the United States and made it hesitant to act and quick to abandon the struggle once the Black Power Movement rose to prominence in the 1970s. The NCC remains a poignant example of how an organization's inability to recognize its own privileged standing in American society inevitably prevents it from dismantling the inequalities which granted it that standing in the first place, no matter its original intentions.

11 o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week.
- Common expression during 1950s and 1960s.[1]

The church, as a whole, insists on a divine mission and guidance and the indisputable possession of truth. Is there anything in the record of the church in America in regard to the Negro to prove this? There is not. If the treatment of the Negro by the Christian Church is called 'divine,' this is an attack on the conception of God more blasphemous than any which the church has always been so ready and eager to punish.

- W.E.B. DuBois in a 1931 article in *The Christian Century*.[2]

Introduction

The Civil Rights Movement (CRM) impacted nearly every public aspect of American life, although it took longer for its effects to spread to some institutions than others. Churches were among the first institutions to segregate and among the last to integrate.[3] As part of this heritage, the enormous moral weight wielded by Protestant churches in the United States was mostly devoted to bolstering, rather than subverting the status quo racial hierarchy. As the pace, breadth, and influence of the Civil Rights Movement expanded, Southern churches, like all other segregated institutions, realized that the "traditional Southern way of life" was becoming unsustainable and would have to change (or at least appear to). In the face of this inevitability, some white Protestant leaders stepped up, either in their local communities or as part of national religious organizations, to encourage their followers to abandon the old ways and embrace integration, arguing not only that this was the moral, Christian, thing to do, but also warning that failure to act would mean condemnation from history and from God. The National Council of Churches (NCC) was an association of many of these white Protestant leaders who wanted to exert a positive force on their constituents. However, they required the denunciations of black leaders in order to see segregation as a moral issue and often required external prompts like Brown v Board, the March on Washington, and the introduction of the Civil Rights Act in Congress to rally and act on their rhetoric. This hesitancy largely blunted what could have been a highly effective effort to lead the confused and apprehensive white Protestant populace towards a new age of racial equality by appealing to their most trusted authority: religion.

Scholarship

Scholars of white Protestantism during the Civil Rights Movement differ on the extent to which national and local prograessive religious organizations influenced the attitudes of ordinary laypeople and politicians. However, they agree that until the 1950s, the majority of Protestant leaders either supported segregation and other forms of racial oppression, or were so ineffectual and gradualist that they made no lasting impact on the status quo. Scholarly works analyzing the relationship between Protestantism and race only emerged in the 1960s.[4] These were based more in sociology rather than history and were often written by worried religious scholars heeding Martin Luther King Jr.'s warning that history would judge white Christians harshly for their inaction during that critical time and would leave a stain on the legacy of the religion.[5]

These are among the primary sources from which I will draw. I am also indebted to Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon for their compilation of speeches and sermons by religious leaders spanning the Civil Rights Movement.[6] Gayraud Wilmore

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[1] Stephen R. Haynes, The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation (New York: Oxford, 2012), 8.

[2] David M. Reimers, White Protestantism and the Negro (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 180.

[3] Shelton H. Smith, In His Image, But...: Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1972), xii; Haynes, The Last Segregated Hour, 8.

[4] T. B. Maston, Segregation and Desegregation: A Christian Approach (New York: Macmillan, 1959); Paul Ramsey, Christian Ethics and the Sit-In, (New York: Association Press, 1961); Reimers, White Protestantism; Donald W. Shriver, The Unsilent South; Prophetic Preaching in Racial Crisis (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965).

[5] Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," (August, 1963). https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf

[6] Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965 (Waco, Tex.:Baylor University Press, 2006).

and James Cone's documentary history volume of black theology has also been an invaluable source.[7] While I am unable to physically travel to the NCC archives at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, James Findlay, discussed below, did a marvelous job synthesizing the archival materials in his book. I have also found many newspaper articles about NCC activities and public statements by the NCC on online databases.

Only in the 1990s did a secular historical scholarship emerge to engage with the actions of white Protestants during the Civil Rights Movement and to gauge their impact on the ever-shifting American racial landscape. James Findlay, whose history of the NCC this paper is indebted to, conducted an extensive study on the changing tactics and motivations of the NCC from its foundation in 1950 to the end of the 1960s, finding that white churches made marginal progress integrating on their own, even when provided with compelling rhetoric and reasons to do so.[8] He argued that they took concrete action only when spurred to do so by the black-led movement, which threatened to leave them in the dust of history if they didn't change. There is also a number of existing scholarly works that either analyze specific religious civil rights activism outside the NCC or allow a broader view of Christianity's role during that time. Michael Friedland added another piece of vital scholarship analyzing the factors pushing and pulling religious nstitutions, giving special attention to how Cold War fear of communism held back integrationist Protestants.[9] Stephen R. Haynes gave an in-depth look at the unique kneel-in movement, in which outside activists forced churches to reassess their own racial policies.[10]

While this paper focuses specifically on white Christianity, David Chappell highlighted the leadership role of black Christians, arguing that prophetic, revivalist Christian traditions had an unparalleled impact on the success of the Civil Rights Movement. Chappell described how civil rights leaders, like Old Testament prophets, could stand aside from society and speak truth to power, regardless of what the dominant narrative of the time demanded.[11] Although less focused on religion, Jason Sokol gave compelling evidence of the lack of clarity of ordinary whites' beliefs during the most tumultuous political time in their life and how influential the leanings of the religious leaders in their lives could be.[12] Sandra K. Gill expounded on this, using sociological studies to show how white solidarity created a silence around the issue of segregation, building up the inertia which progressive religious organizations struggled to overcome.[13]

My paper will build on these works by focusing on how southerners defined their own whiteness in relation to rapidly shifting religious and political standards in a historical study of the NCC. Specifically, I will show how mainstream Protestant values have been changing since the

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[7] Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, Black Theology: A Documentary History (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979).

[8] James F. Findlay, Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950–1970 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[9] Michael B. Friedland, Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet: White Clergy and the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements, 1954–1973 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[10] Haynes, The Last Segregated Hour.

[11] David L. Chappell, A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[12] Jason Sokol, There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975 (1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

[13] Sandra K. Gill, "Recalling a Difficult Past: Whites' Memories of Birmingham," Sociological Inquiry 82, no. 1 (2012): 29–48. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2011.00404.x.

founding of the American colonies in order to give a moral sanction to the US's changing racial political policies. These mainstream Protestant values diverged from those of black Protestant churches, which formed their own oppositional culture. The NCC's failure to recognize and reconcile that difference led to its inability to engage with the goals of the Black Power Movement at the tail end of the Civil Rights Movement. I will argue that, despite the clarity of vision of its leadership, especially J. Oscar Lee, Eugene Carson Blake and Robert Spike, the NCC was unable to make much real progress outside the activist framework built by the black-led Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s because of the pact of silence among white Protestants and the unrecognized racial privilege which allowed them to do so.

My paper will begin with a brief overview of Christian involvement in the construction of the American racial hierarchy, starting from the arrival of the first black people in the American colonies in 1619 onwards. It will then transition to religious influence on attitudes towards segregation and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s and discuss how it helped build up the selective consciousness and inertia that solidified de facto segregation as opposed to de jure. The heart of the paper will analyze how the NCC waded into this world of prejudices and solidarities, and also break down the strategies they used throughout the CRM, whether or not and why they accomplished their intended goals, and the impact they have made on society today.

Slavery and Abolition

The United States' legal foundations were based on Christian notions of morality and equality, that all men are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." But its wealth was based on the enslavement and unpaid labor of captives taken from Africa, who were deprived of those unalienable rights. Christian clerics provided one of the most persuasive ideas to bridge that uncomfortable dissonance: The Curse Theory, also called the Hamitic Theory. This was based on a passage from Genesis 9:18-29, which traces "the black race" to Ham, the son of Noah, who cursed Ham's descendants to be the servants of the descendants of his lighter-skinned sons, Shem and Japheth.14 This had already percolated among Persian scholars since the 900s, but was codified into a theory specifically linking scripture and black inferiority in 1578 by George Best, where after it quickly caught on.15 The Hamitic Theory not only clearly delineated Africans as biologically separate from their white enslavers, but as naturally inferior and rightfully subjugated according to God's word in the Bible.

This belief in the God-ordained separation of races had already influenced the first English code of law in the Virginia colony, which in 1630 ordered the whipping of a white man for "abusing himself to the dishonor of God and the shame of Christians, by defiling his body in lying with a negroe [sic]."16 By the 1700s, hundreds of slaves had been brought to the American colonies. In order to justify the continuing influx, Puritan ministers like Samuel Willard in Boston declared that "All Servitude…began in the curse" and was "so ordered in the Providence of God."17 However, unlike the Spanish Catholics who baptized enslaved Africans so they might reap

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14 Ibram X. Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2017), 21.

15 Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning, 32.

16 Smith, In His Image, But..., 3.

17 Ibid, 5

their heavenly reward for fulfilling their earthly duty of servitude, English slaveowners at first did not convert their slaves. They believed that it would be unethical to enslave fellow baptized Christians and feared that introducing slaves to Christian principles would educate them and cause them to rebel against their treatment. After all, Christianity would become the first social grouping in which masters and slaves would share – they would be more connected by both holding the belief in the divinity of Christ. These attitudes began to shift in the 1700s thanks to the prolific Puritan minister Cotton Mather, who tirelessly advocated for the Christianization of slaves, arguing that Christianity contained no law forbidding servitude and that to do so would make them more docile and efficient workers. He was confident that if masters taught their slaves scripture through a filter of justification, they could "show them, That it is GOD who has caused them to be Servants; and that they Serve JESUS CHRIST, while they are at Work for their Masters."[18] This message was magnified by George Whitefield, the most influential evangelical minister of the Great Awakening, who hoped that through his teaching, "masters and mistresses will shortly see that Christianity will not make their negroes worse slaves."[19] These messages soothed the consciences of any slaveowners concerned with how the imposition of bondage coincided with God's will.

The only significant rift between secular law and religious teachings in the American colonies was the Virginia colony's law, passed in 1662 and which spread to the other colonies, which decreed that all children born "derived their status from the condition of the mother."20 This law was passed in order to allow slaveowners to rape female slaves, both for their own gratification, but more importantly, to increase their wealth by creating more slaves. Religious principle, which at the time would still have decreed the whipping of the perpetrators of miscegenation for "abusing himself to the dishonor of God and the shame of Christians," was trumped by masters' sexual desire and financial expediency. The ensuing mass rape was instead justified by the development of the myth of black female hypersexuality, that female slaves were so sexually aggressive that they were incapable of withholding consent and so lascivious that they seduced their masters. This myth would eventually gain a religious face in the creation of the hypersexual minstrel character: The Jezebel.

Heeding Mather and Whitefield's promises, slaveowners began baptizing and teaching slaves that their labor was God-ordained that they could achieve salvation through carrying it out without complaint. This was a powerful and demoralizing method of mental colonization and internalizing feelings of inferiority for many slaves, especially those born in the New World. However, many slaves saw themselves in the enslaved Hebrews in Egypt of the Book of Exodus

[18] Cotton Mather and Paul Royster, editor, "The Negro Christianized. An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity (1706)" (1706), Electronic Texts in American Studies, 28, 20.

[19] George Whitefield, The Journals of George Whitefield (Shropshire, England: Quinta Press, 2009), 526.

[20] Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning, 41.

[21] Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning, 223.

and saw their enslavement as cruel and unjust as that of the Israelites. Church also became a community-building hub for slaves on Sundays, where they could form relationships outside those imposed by slave-owners, preserve traditions from Africa, and sometimes plot against their masters. These realms of mental and physical resistance would build the ideological and demographic foundations of black churches, which continued to use Christian scripture as a site of subverting the status-quo of white Christianity. Black churches remolded Christianity to suit their cultures and circumstances, an action which white Christians feared and condemned. Journalist Henry Villard, for example, was repelled by the Gullah people of South Carolina's syncretic Christianity, which he saw as tainted by "savage superstitions" and "fetish worship."[21] Black churches' formation of a new Christian culture forever set them apart from the umbrella of white Protestantism, which continued to view them as wayward and savage. This division of Christianity along racial lines alienated black churches from the religious power structure of the United States, but also prevented them from being co-opted by white ideology and gave them a measure of independence from all white influence. These ideological differences ensured that church integration would require not only a changed attitude on race, but a fundamental reconciliation of differing religious beliefs. This paradox of using the same Bible to justify and attack slavery did not go unnoticed by some white ministers and preachers. Where many Christian churches provided platforms from which clergymen could formulate and disseminate slavery-justifying ideology and rhetoric, some were vehicles for abolitionism as well. Not all Christians were convinced of the benevolent and Godly nature of slavery. The Quakers of Pennsylvania, while a largely slaveowning population, produced some of the first and most strident opponents of the institution. Primary among these was John Woolman, who launched an assiduous campaign against every point other clergymen used to defend slavery. His essay, Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes, the first part of which was published in 1754, contained rhetoric which would be echoed by proponents of abolitionism and civil rights until the present day. The core of his argument, backed up by scripture, was that all men are brethren because they share in God's divinity, that "liberty is the gift of God to all his children," and that all men are "equally entitled to treatment according to the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12)."[22] He also directly attacked the Hamitic Theory, saying that the idea of slavery as a punishment for the sin "committed by Ham, the son of Noah; is a supposition too gross to be admitted into the mind of any person, who sincerely desires to be governed by solid principles."[23] Those like Judge Samuel Sewall attacked the Hamitic Theory on a scriptural level, interpreting the ambiguous passage from Genesis as saying that the curse fell upon Canaan, not Ham, and that according to his interpretation, dark-skinned people were actually descended from Cush.[24] Where humanitarian arguments appealing to a common brotherhood might fall

22 Smith, In His Image, But..., 27-28.
23 John Woolman, "Some Considerations on Keeping Negroes," (1754), 1.
24 Samuel Sewall, The Selling of Joseph (Boston: printed byBartholomew Green and John Allen, 1700), 2

on deaf ears, technical dissections of the literal meaning of the Bible were in fashion. These arguments spread quickly throughout the northern colonies, and later states, solidifying the North as free land where the moral compass turned against slavery. Public opinion of religious Northerners regarded slavery as at worst an abomination against God in need of immediate dismantling and at best a necessary evil, for those like Thomas Jefferson, who continued to own slaves while vaguely wishing "to see the end of prejudice and slavery."[25] Religious southerners, however, largely refused to be swayed, especially after the patenting of the cotton gin in 1794. This exponentially increased the profitability and demand for slavery and amplified religious justifications for it while silencing condemnations.

It is crucial to remember that religious abolitionists rarely believed in the full equality of African Americans and usually considered them intellectually inferior. In their minds, abolition seldom translated into integration and civil rights. They instead hoped for either a segregated system, through which benevolent white philanthropists would raise the black race to the level of mental cultivation of "exceptional Negroes" like the popular poet Phyllis Wheatley, or a mass recolonization of frica, by which slaves would be sent to Liberia and maintain America's racial purity. Thomas Jefferson believed that even Christianity's "civilizing" power had its limits in bettering the inferior minds of most black people, lamenting that "religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet."26 Even the most fiery and popular voice of abolitionism, William Lloyd Garrison, believed that African Americans were in need of uplift from the brutish state into which slavery had plunged them, calling for an "increase in knowledge and moral improvement" of free black people and that it would not yet be practicable "to give undeveloped black men the vote," a sentiment with which Abraham Lincoln agreed.27 These assumptions of black inferiority, which received an added bolster from the rise of scientific racism pioneered by eugenicists like Francis Galton, meant that white Christianity continued to sanction segregation and unequal treatment of African Americans even after the goal of emancipation had been accomplished. Religion and political ideology were so intertwined during the 1800s that even politicians and activists with no claim to religious leadership used prophetic rhetoric to persuade their listeners that God was on their side. Garrison, while addressing a crowd of free black people, claimed that his abolition work was a duty, "as a lover of Jesus Christ, and of his equalizing, republican and benevolent precepts, I rejoice to meet," and cried out to his crowd, "take courage…fear not: the Lord God is on your side."28 Christian activists during the CRM loved to cite a story about Abraham Lincoln, which may or may not have actually occurred. When a delegation of ministers told Lincoln

[25] Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning, 122.

[26] Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (London: J. Stockdale, 1787), 234. 27 Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning, 169, 229.

[28] William Lloyd Garrison and African American Pamphlet Collection, An Address, Delivered Before the Free People of Color, in Philadelphia, New-York, and other cities, during the month of June (Boston: Printed by Stephen Foster, 1831), 3-4.

[29] Maston, Segregation and Desegregation, 167.

[30] Smith, In His Image, But..., 190.

that they hoped the Lord was on their side during the Civil War, Lincoln, informed them that his was not his concern, "for we know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."[29] These examples show how preoccupied the American people were with God's judgement as well as how fundamental religion was to Americans' self-conception of their citizenship in a nation aligned with Jesus's "republican" precepts.

Siding with God was not the monopoly of northerners, however. Southern ministers countered this rhetoric by accusing abolitionism of "replacing the authority of the word of God with that of a 'higher law' and…thus [becoming] a rationalistic and atheistic movement perilous to the Christian faith."[30] During the Civil War, they maintained that slavery was God's way of redeeming African savages through work and the learning of the gospel and that "only a Confederate victory would assure the fulfillment of God's design for the Negro and preserve true Christianity in America."[31] After the Civil War, former Confederates like John B. Adger, professor of church history at Columbia Theological Seminary, defended themselves by saying, "Slavery is a form of government which the Bible does not condemn. The Southern [Presbyterian] Church did therefore not condemn it. She does not condemn it now… Any man or church who says it is a sin takes some other rule of faith and is so far infidel."[32] The continued propagation of these sentiments among defeated Confederates coupled with the stinging belief that they had failed God's will sparked the biblically-named Redemption movement after Reconstructionists weakened their hold on Southern governments in 1877. The Redemptioners, aided by Klan terrorism, desired returning the South as close to its postwar state as possible through overturning all Reconstruction laws and alternate forms of black forced labor like convict-leasing in order to redeem themselves in the eyes of God. The Klan believed itself to be a team of Christian, specifically Protestant, crusaders using divinely sanctioned violence to achieve the goal of Redemption.

The sense of white superiority among white abolitionists was confirmed after the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment had achieved their goals. The energy with which they had campaigned for abolition did not extend into a fight for equality, or even integration. The few Reconstruction-era reformers still fighting for increased political power for Southern black people were silenced or scared off by the rise of Redemption. As David Reimers lamented, "in the 1870s, this crusade waned, and the Protestant churches capitulated to the system of segregation and discrimination that has characterized American race relations ever since."[33] Northern white churches considered their work done and slipped into complacency, while Southern white churches actively assisted the Redemption movement, a state of affairs which continued for the next several decades. In the meantime, black churches in the South fought white interference, built community and formed leaders in the face of massive opposition.

Segregation and Integration

The 1900s saw a scientific revolution and

[31] Smith, In His Image, But..., 190.
[32] Ibid, 209.
[33] Reimers, White Protestantism and the Negro, vii.

an expansion of the power of the federal government in the United States, both of which widened the gap between church and state. Religion, while still vital in the everyday lives of many, began losing its hallowed position as the only source of truth and morality. Religious ideology was no longer necessary to legitimize government. The Hamitic Theory took a backseat to Scientific Racism, which produced bogus study after bogus study confirming to white people what they already knew – that whites had rationality and culture while blacks had brute strength and sexuality, which made them good unskilled laborers but dangerous to white women and should be kept separate. The *Plessy v Ferguson* decision of 1896 allowed whites to live under the delusion that black facilities were separate and equal and that black people's inability to lift themselves out of poverty was therefore their own fault.

White churches no longer took the lead in disseminating racist theory, but they confirmed it by consistently reassuring their congregations that segregation was beneficial to both races and that both wanted it that way. White church boards, especially, but not exclusively, in the South, were usually made up of wealthy and conservative men who regulated the messages their clergy spread. As younger and more open-minded clergy members graduated from seminaries and searched for church positions, they found themselves censored and subjected to a pact of silence if they wanted to keep their jobs. One such minister was Joseph Evans, part of the new cohort of religious leaders who graduated divinity school in 1940, many of whom were consumed with ideas of race and a fear of a race war - ideas stemming from World War II. As Associate Minister of the Washington Street Methodist Church, in Andersen, South Carolina, he gave an ambitious sermon appealing for racial equality. His rhetoric appealed to religion, quoting St. Paul that "God has made all men of one blood," uplift suasion (the showcasing of "model black citizens" to prove they are not inferior), citing George Washington Carver and Marian Anderson, and patriotism, bringing up the nearby army training facility and saying, "Colored men are training to fight Hitler right now but can't vote as citizens of South Carolina because of the all-white primary." While some youths expressed support of his words, the church board was less impressed, excoriating him, blacklisting him, and reassigning him to a dying church in a small town.[34] This was a common fate for clergy who stepped out of line to try to speak truth to power.

World War II did help change some Southerners' perceptions on race. Many white soldiers from the South returned to their communities changed men after risking their lives alongside black comrades in arms. The Double-V campaign, led by black activists, compounded these changes in attitude by pointing out the hypocrisy of the US fighting for democratic ideals against a racist regime while still imposing terror and discrimination on a large segment of its own population. A white Petty Officer, Lewis Barton, wrote in his hometown newspaper in Lumberton, North Carolina, that, "before the war I had the same feelings towards the Negro as the typical Southerner. God didn't intend them to have equal rights with other races, I thought," before elaborating how his views had drastically changed.[35] Sergeant Joe Gilmer went even further,

[34] Sara Evans, Interview by author, Phone Interview, Minneapolis, October 9, 2019.

writing in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, "I am afraid that all race prejudice is gone from the boys who have fought this war."[36] While Gilmer and his platoon's awakening was encouraging and part of a powerful trend among young white men and women, his words were not true at all. Barton and Gilmer were still in a minority, as most white soldiers believed that the American values they had fought to defend very much included racial customs, beliefs supported by segregated garrisons. While some white Americans at home saw patriotism and loyalty in black soldiers, more were livid with anger at seeing them in equal uniforms and paralyzed with fear seeing them with guns. Lynchings and riots spiked during and after the war as Southern whites attempted to ensure that those military uniforms wouldn't give black citizens "ideas above their station."[37] Ben Fielder, a black soldier who thought that his wartime camaraderie with whites was indicative of a broader trend soon found his hopes dampened upon his return home, where he met only coldness and anger, even from former comrades. "I was still just a n*****. Not an American soldier anymore. Just a n*****."[38] The status quo had been challenged, but remained intact. Churches largely continued preaching what they had preached to Barton before the war.

After the war, a minority of white clergymen were able to break through the pact of silence. A particularly fiery example of this was Hawley Lynn, of Pickens County, South Carolina, who delivered a fiery sermon after 31 local men lynched Willie Earle on February 16, 1947, a black man suspected of killing a white cab driver. He began by addressing the systemic silence, saying, "I know there are some of us who would like to say, 'Let's have no more talk of lynching: it has been talked about the streets, on the buses, discussed in stores and beer halls and factories, and at least skirted around in the home and Sunday School, and it's no subject for church.'" He was fed up with the silence, knowing it was the only thing which shielded the perpetrators from confronting the inhumanity of their actions. Knowing that some of the murderers and people who knew them were in his audience, he decided he would not allow them this shelter any longer, bellowing, "Christian friends, who lynched Willie Earle?... WICKED MEN, UNGODLY SOULS, MEN WITHOUT THE LOVE OF CHRIST!"[39] He felt that he had a moral responsibility to speak up, for to respect the pact of silence was to tacitly offer not only his own condonement of the crime, but that of Protestantism as a whole. Ministers like Lynn were part of a growing cohort of white Protestant clergy who were growing increasingly disillusioned with their role as upholders of the racial order, who likely thought often of Lincoln's worry that he would be found on the side of God.

However, most white Christian forays into activism were still tempered by a fear of implicating the Protestant Church in the formation and maintenance of the racial hierarchy which they found increasingly abhorrent. As the CRM swelled, empowered by the Brown decision in 1954, liberal clergy found themselves faced with a true test of action: acting

[35] Sokol, There Goes My Everything, 19.
[36] Ibid, 19.
[37] Sokol, There Goes My Everything, 20.
[38] Ibid, 24
[39] Will Gravely, "'A Man Lynched in Inhuman Lawlessness': South Carolina Methodist Hawley Lynn condemns the killing of Willie Earle (1947)," Methodist History 35, no. 2 (1997): 76-77,
[40] Gill, "Recalling a Difficult Past," 31.

on their progressive rhetoric and integrating churches. Clergy had an unprecedented ability to shape the identities of their followers as before the CRM, "white identity was based in racial segregation."[40] As this foundation was being uprooted, church leaders had the opportunity to fill the void with tolerant and charitable ideas as they so frequently preached from scripture. And indeed, their words were having some impact on the attitudes of their congregants, who found themselves increasingly confused and adrift in tumultuous times. Kenneth T. Andrews and others conducted a study during the spreading boycott movement, which found that in general, church attendance had a "negative impact… on support for the sit-ins," but that "Whites who attended churches where ministers discussed moderate views on 'race relations' were more likely to support protest."[41] This aligns with Jason Sokol's thesis that most white Southerners had no coherent response to the movement, that they were "fearful, silent, and often inert," and that "Southern churches both shaped and reflected the changing – or stagnant – racial attitudes of white southerners."[42] For many small communities, churches were the main sources of leadership, and members anxiously clung to their words, hoping for reassurance.

Some white Christians at the time did try to address the structural roots of church segregation while still trying to avoid a complete condemnation of church practice. A good example of this is David Reimers, who wrote White Protestantism and the Negro, a detailed history of the Protestant Church's interactions with black Americans, starting from slavery.[43] It tries to highlight the work of progressive, anti-segregationist clergy throughout that history. And while it implicates the Church in spreading racist ideology, it also tries to credit it for the CRM, albeit inadvertently, saying about postwar missionary schools for emancipated slaves, "Although the educational programs of northern missionaries smacked of paternalism and Booker T. Washington's philosophy, they also propagated the Christian gospel." He linked these schools to the formation of the black ministers leading the movement, hoping that "It may well be that these Negro churchmen will yet teach the white Protestant churches the full meaning of the gospel of the brotherhood of man they espouse."[44] In doing so, he characterized the Church as both cause and cure of America's racial problem, while also placing the burden of the latter upon black ministers. He was also quick to argue that "Protestantism's treatment of the Negro was no better and no worse than that of American society as a whole."[45] However, he conceded that these arguments invalidate the Church's claim to be a leader in the formation of social consciousness and the guardian of morality and makes it appear as a passive bystander, saying, "The churches might be expected to behave better than secular institutions, however, because they are supposed to be the moral leaders of society."[46] Stephen Haynes made the same observation writing from the present day, pointing out that the church claimed more authority on moral issues than

[41] Kenneth T. Andrews, Kraig Beyerlein, and Tuneka Tucker Farnum, "The Legitimacy of Protest: Explaining White Southerners' Attitudes Toward the Civil Rights Movement., Social Forces 94, no. 3 (2016): 1037.
[42] Sokol, There Goes My Everything, 4, 100.
[43] Reimers, White Protestantism and the Negro.
[44] Ibid, 188.
[45] Ibid, 180.
[46] Ibid, viii.
[47] Haynes, The Last Segregated Hour, 8.
[48] Sokol, There Goes My Everything, 100.

society as a whole, conceding "But this does not relieve American Christianity of responsibility for its sunning moral failure half a century ago, when many Christians responded to the gradual integration of society by drawing a line in the sand around their churches."[47] While churches were not the sole originators of racist theories designed to legitimize the oppression of African Americans, "they imbued the pre-civil rights racial order with elements of timelessness and righteousness that only religion could impart."[48] The vacillating and gradualism of progressive Christians like Reimers was illustrative of the reluctant nature of white church leaders to face the implications of the CRM head-on. This was the religious environment in which the National Council of Churches formed, hoping to bring strength, organization, and consensus to these hesitant and confused individuals.

The National Council of Churches

The National Council of Churches was established in 1950, not from scratch, but as a replacement of the Federated Council of Churches (FCC), which was founded in 1908. The FCC included member organizations representing Protestant denominations, especially Baptist and Presbyterian. The FCC was founded to promote ecumenism, the strengthening of ties and communications between different church branches, as well as to promote the Social Gospel, the call for humans to rid themselves of social evils to make way for the Second Coming of Christ. The NCC shared these values and expanded its organizational structure while also shifting its priority to working directly with smaller churches. As Jill K. Gill points out, the very definition and nature of ecumenism is complex and confusing as it encompasses beliefs ranging from:

> community over self-interest, peaceful discussion over violence, collaboration over competition, universalism over exclusivity, the prophetic role to "speak truth to power" over affirming an oppressive status quo, benevolence over individual acquisition, preaching social justice over mere personal piety, and the separation of church and state.[50]

All of these would be put to the test over the next two decades.

The FCC had already set up a modest foundation for opposing segregation, filing an amicus curiae brief supporting Heman Sweatt in the 1950 Supreme Court case Sweatt v. Painter, which forced the University of Texas Law School to admit a black applicant, a crucial blow against Plessy v. Ferguson. The FCC had also established a Department of Race Relations in 1921, which was headed by Dr. George Haynes, creator of Fisk University's Sociology Department and co-founder of the Urban League. The NCC's stance on desegregation and racial equality in its early years was actually a step backwards from that of its predecessor. When the Brown v Board of Education case was making headlines in 1954, the NCC passed a resolution supporting the decision after it was

[49] Findlay, Church People, 5.

[50] Jill K. Gill, Embattled Ecumenism: The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011), 5.

[51] Findlay, Church People, 17.

made, but never submitted an amicus curiae attempting to influence it.[52] The relative silence of the NCC in its early years can partially be explained by the rising threat of communism in the minds of Americans in the 1950s. The NCC, being an ecumenical organization, sought to find common ground with all denominations. Given the tense political atmosphere, even the remotest hint of communism in its platform and ideology would drive away those fearing a touch of the red paintbrush. As Michael B. Friedland put it:

> As [conservative Christians] believed segregation to be a Christian doctrine, it necessarily followed that those who sought to undermine it were atheists, and they concluded that all atheists were Communists, all integrationists t ook their orders from Moscow, and were thus seeking to impose a foreign ideology on the South.[53]

This argument was strikingly similar to the idea that abolitionists were following a rational and atheistic higher law, so popular in Southern churches a century earlier. While the NCC was willing to take the PR hit of denouncing segregation (which was nearly the only thing they did during the 1950s), the fear of being perceived as communist remained in the backs of their minds, moderating the amount and zealousness of the actions they were willing to take. The Red Scare would continue to influence the NCC during the entire Civil Rights Movement.

Even the NCC's denunciations of segregation rang hollow when compared with their own actions. The NCC began by attempting to clarify their religious stance on the matter in their 1952 "Statement on Churches and Segregation" which stated that "the pattern of segregation is diametrically opposed to what Christians believe about the worth of men. We must take our stand against it."[54] However, despite this progressive rhetoric on racial equality, during the early 1950s NCC was almost exclusively white except for some black secretaries and J. Oscar Lee.[55] Lee was Haynes's student and replaced him in the FCC in 1947, keeping his position as Director of the Department of Race Relations after the transition to the NCC, in which the name changed to The Department of Racial and Cultural Relations. He was the most radical and outspoken voice in the organization, but he faced stifling opposition from within as the leadership resisted his efforts to integrate his own staff and toned down his proposed condemnation of the Emmett Till Verdict in 1956.56 These actions and, more tellingly, inactions, followed with the NCC's general attitude of prioritizing continuity over change and education over activism.

Interestingly, among NCC leaders, recognizing the problem of churches' blindness, unwillingness, and gradualism was seldom an issue, at least in words. Self-aware voices spoke loudly and often angrily, usually to little effect. Lee, in his analysis of the process of desegregation in 1954 after the Brown decision argued, "The pattern of segregation in the United States is given moral sanction by the fact that churches and church institutions, as a result of insensitiveness and social

[52] Ibid, 17.
[53] Friedland, Lift Up Your Voice, 46.
[54] Findlay, Church People, 14.
[55] Findlay, Church People, 18.
[56] Ibid, 20.

practice." He differentiated between de jure segregation, which was collapsing, and de facto segregation, which existed in citizens' minds and held strong. He realized that eliminating the latter form would require "dealing with customary practices of segregation in almost every aspect of the organization."[57] This statement, one of the NCC's strongest of the decade, was still characterized by hesitant, vacillating language of not wishing to offend anyone. It was filled with reassurances of the benignity of integration and highlighted success stories of integrated churches where, contrary to expectations, nothing happened. It applauded gradual progress where it was being made, especially in YMCAs and YWCAs, the Christian organizations with the youngest and least frightened memberships.

The NCC would sharpen over the next decade as it learned the full extent and systemic nature of mental barriers to integration, as well as the difficulty of breaking them down. This is the statement of Robert W. Spike, Director of the NCC's recently-founded Commission on Religion and Race after the successful passage of Civil Rights Act of 1964, published in the popular magazine Look, "For years, most of our churches have aided and abetted the Anglo-Saxon white conspiracy... the churches in this country have been dominated by our society's equivocation and, sometimes, outright evil in the matter of discrimination."[58] While it is important to note that Spike, being white, was freer to make bolder statements, the tonal shift is still striking. This shift is the result of years of frustration with inertia and complacency, both on the part of the NCC and the local communities which the NCC had since entered to assist in a full activist role. These developments and the difficulty which accompanied them will be expanded upon below.

The main activist step taken by the NCC in the 1950s was the "Southern Plan," a Movement to talk to the white religious leaders there and form connections with the predominantly black activists.[59] This man was Will Campbell, a respected and gregarious white minister and World War II veteran with innovative ideas on how religion should influence racial attitudes. For example, he argued that embracing integration and religious equality was a form of Redemption in the eyes of God, a radical twist on the word segregationists had appropriated to fight Northern Reconstruction policies after the Civil War. As he put it, "'by this grace we are no longer Negro or white…but we are a part of a community which asks only one question and that has to do with redemption, not with color.' And the Southerner 'understands these words.'"[60] In addition to offering his services to civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., the Montgomery Improvement Association, and other integration leaders in smaller cities, Campbell was instrumental in reporting the Southern situation back to the northern-based NCC. The leadership was still out-of-touch as to exactly how severe the racial hierarchy was and

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[57] J. Oscar Lee, "The Status of Racial Integration in Religious Institutions," The Journal of Negro Education 23, no. 42 Sokol, There Goes My Everything, 4, 100. 3 (1954): 232.

[58] Robert Spike, "Our Churches' Sin Against the Negro," Look 29, no. 10 (May 18, 1965): 29.

[59] Findlay, Church People, 22.

[60] Ibid, 26.

[61] Ibid, 27.

[62] Friedland, Lift Up Your Voice, 46.

[63] Sokol, There Goes My Everything, 101.

how ordinary people might react to the guidance and intervention of a Northern organization.[61] Campbell had realized that "racism had become part of the segregationist's 'religious heritage' and a 'heresy' with which Protestantism had not yet learned to cope."[62] His motivation was fueled by an intense fear "that white supremacy would retain a stranglehold on southern religion," a fear started when he witnessed a ceremony in which the Klan presented a pulpit Bible to his childhood church.[63]

While these were all positive actions showing the NCC's growing commitment to join the struggle instead of cheering from the sidelines, Campbell was only as successful as one man can be. Not only did the NCC not expand the program when they saw it was going well, but they dragged their feet even getting it started, delaying Campbell's deployment until late 1956, prioritizing their funding for other activities. Henry J. Pratt explains the tight-fistedness of the NCC in relation to activism as partially due to "'The National Lay Committee,' a group of ultra-conservatives who in those years exercised significant influence at the highest policy levels."[64] No matter how pure the intentions of many of its members, the NCC's agenda was still held hostage by the fear of public judgement.

It was in the 1960s that the NCC, swayed by the inescapable momentum of the CRM and fueled by an increasingly youthful and radical leadership, finally committed themselves to acting on the rhetoric they had been espousing for the last decade. They were shamed into action by the condemnations of the black leadership, both secular and religious, who had far surpassed them. And they found more concrete initiatives they could help with without leading, like the March on Washington, the Freedom Summer, and especially the fight to pass the Civil Rights Act. Findlay observed this tipping point, referring to it using the New Testament word Kairos, or "a 'right' time, or moment of heightened expectations…a time of opportunity demanding a response: God offers us a new set of possibilities and we have to accept or decline."[65] He coined the term in this context. A well-funded Commission on Religion and Race was created in order to "catch up" with the CRM. A council spokesperson affirmed in 1963 upon the creation of the Commission that "there has always seemed to be a time for gradual change, and modest tokens of progress in racial justice were accepted as the best we can do." They realized that the current circumstances made this stagnation immoral and hypocritical, continuing, "In such a time the Church of Jesus Christ is called upon to put aside every lesser engagement, to confess her sins of omission and delay, and to move forward to witness her essential belief that every child of God is a brother to every other."[66] There was a growing sense within the NCC that the Day of Reckoning was close at hand, and they remembered the verse from Matthew 25:31–46, that the sheep would be separated from the goats, and yearned to be in the former category.

Integrationist religious leaders within and

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[64] Henry J. Pratt, "The Growth of Political Activism in the National Council of Churches," The Review of Politics Churches' Sin Against the Negro," Look 29, no. 10 (May 18, 1965): 29. 34, no. 3 (1972): 332.
[65] Findlay, Church People, 4.
[66] Ibid, 3.
[67] Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," (August, 1963), 5. https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf

and outside the NCC were making clear in religious terms that failure to act would inevitably lead to God's judgement. However, there were just as many appeals for churches to change simply out of a pragmatic instinct of self-preservation lest they become swept away in the tide of history. The CRM made clearer every day that the old days of formal segregation were over as private and public organizations capitulated in the face of court orders, boycotts and popular demand. Churches were lagging behind, and Martin Luther King Jr. made perfectly clear in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" what their fate would be if they didn't change: "If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century."[67] Indeed, many in the NCC felt King was speaking directly to them when he reflected:

> I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say, follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother. In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sidelines and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities.[68]

David Chappell argued that King, along with other black Christian civil rights leaders, drew their strength from an aspect of Christianity which had survived in black churches, but had been long forgotten in white ones: prophetic religion. Where white integrationists approached their task with a gradualist mindset, hoping to make incremental progress, King was able to use religion to "inspire solidarity and self-sacrificial devotion to [his] cause" in a way only previously seen by pro- and anti-slavery ministers stoking their nation into a Civil War.[69] King and other black ministers were able not only to present equality as a moral imperative, but as an absolute necessity for any true Christian.

Other Christians realized the import of King's warning too, even before his letter. Christian ethicist T.B. Maston, in his response to the Brown verdict, cautioned, "the Christian religion, as well as political democracy, has a great deal at stake in the outcome of the present struggle regarding segregation."[70] Ben Lacey Rose, a professor at Union Theological Seminary, feared that the church was becoming "the last stronghold of segregation on earth."[71] James A. Pike, a leading spokesperson for the Episcopal Churches, cried out in frustration, "Why does the Christian community seem unable to heed the religious admonition to 'love they neighbors?'… There is no question that the church has become the last stronghold of an evil it was supposed to resist."[72] The anger and frustration over the US's "race problem" of white northern clergy had reached a fever pitch only previously seen by the pre-Civil War abolitionists, even if this zeal did not as readily translate into action.

While the judgement of History was

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[68] Ibid, 5.

[69] Chappell, Stone of Hope, 8.

[70] Maston, Segregation and Desegregation, vii.

[71] Ben Lacey Rose, Racial Segregation in the Church (Richmond: Outlook Publishers, 1957), 3

[72] James A. Pike, "Bishop Calls Church Bars a 'Stronghold of Evil'" The Afro-American, Oct. 7, 1961: 16.

certainly on the minds of the NCC and other Christian leadership, much of the NCC's rhetoric was in line with King's desires, appealing to the common humanity and divinity of every human. Many of its arguments for integration stemmed directly from the Bible, citing how God created all men the same, in His image and that therefore drawing artificial distinctions between humans based on appearance was against the will of God. These arguments were best elaborated by theologians outside the NCC, like Ben Lacey Rose, who explained that: "The Bible declares that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34-35), and it pointedly warns believers when they assemble for worship not to be partial (James 2:1-9). God has declared that his house is to be a house of prayer for all people (Isa. 56:7; Mk. 11:17)." Rose read the Bible's lack of racial identifications as proof that God never intended race to be a grounds for oppression and discrimination, citing further, *"Ho, everyone who thirsts come to the waters,* (Isa. 55:1)*; Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden,* (Matt. 11:28)… To thwart or restrict God Almighty's gracious and clear invitations is the height of presumption and blasphemy."[73] These references were convincing and powerful, although Rose neglected to mention that race, as a social construct, meant something entirely different when the Bible was written, and never touched the theory that Jesus himself was dark skinned, which was starting to gain traction in black churches.

The efforts of Campbell faded in comparison to the 100-strong NCC delegation sent to the March on Washington in 1963. The head of the delegation was Eugene Carson Blake, who had served as president of the NCC from 1954-57 and now acted as a representative for the Commission on Religion and Race. Blake was one of the many speakers that day overshadowed by King's "I Have a Dream" speech, but his "We Come Late, Late We Come" speech acted as a powerful rebuke of continuing racism in the churches.74 Speaking directly to white Christians, he attempted to shatter the persistent justification that segregation is God-ordained, quoting the Abraham Lincoln parable, "Never say God is on our side. Rather pray that we may be found on God's side." He continued flipping the paradigm, saying, "Yes, we come to march behind and with these amazingly able leaders of the Negro Americans, who, to the shame of almost every white American, have alone and without us mirrored the suffering on the cross of Jesus Christ."75 Blake was portraying African Americans as messianic saviors of America, rather than as the cursed descendants of Ham white Protestantism had so long believed them to be. The month before the March on Washington, he was arrested along with other activists for protesting outside a segregated amusement park in Baltimore. As he was being arrested, he gave another stinging critique of white churches, contending, "White citizens have escaped "physically" to the suburbs of [Baltimore] and other cities. But it is too soon for the Christian churches to find out whether all their constituents

[73] Ben Lacey Rose, "When Negroes are Barred from Worship, what Can be Done About it?" Presbyterian Survey, (July 1964): 18.

[74] Shriver, The Unsilent South, 101.

[75] Eugene Carson Blake, "Late We Come," in Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement, ed. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2006), 582.

are going to escape morally and psychologically." He called into question the epistemological relationship between churches and their constituents, saying that clergy could not simultaneously be both leaders and followers of thought, wondering, "The church, by definition, is part of the religious culture of the community… And ordinary American attitudes affect the suburban churches. But the important question is, is the church affecting theirs?" While Blake's leadership of the NCC did push the organization further towards walking the walk, it is an indictment of the massive inertia within the NCC that even such a firebrand could not transform it into the sharp instrument of activism he desired.

The problem which J. Oscar Lee had illustrated with great detail was that churches did the bare minimum. Up until black activists problematized segregation in national headlines, the bare minimum white churches were required to do to interact with the issue of segregation was absolutely nothing; they could ignore it and sleep with clear consciences. What the NCC had been trying to get these churches to do during the 1950s (while largely failing to do so within their own ranks) was to increase the bare minimum to some form of action which at least appeared to be moving towards integration. For many churches, the illusion of action was often enough to continue de facto segregation. Churches devised methods to show desegregation on paper, but which bore no resemblance to the actual racial makeup of the church. David M. Reimers also called out the gradualism he noticed in many churches, pointing out that often, "Negroes attended services but were not welcome as members, or if they were members they were not selected for leadership positions in the church… Many white churches still closed their doors and fled to the suburbs rather than face the problems of a changing neighborhood."[77] This was an important step in linking the role of church discrimination with housing discrimination. Robert Spike of the NCC himself wrote in his fiery tirade in Look Magazine, "Many churches have also salved their consciences with the single Negro or Oriental member, trotted out as evidence that 'we are making progress.' Through such empty gestures, the doctrine of the oneness of the human family under God has become twisted."[78] The force of the CRM did away with these incremental nudgings and made clear that the bare minimum which would be accepted was immediate integration. It removed the comfortable blinders of complacency and made segregation a clear-cut moral issue to white institutions.

In fact, many youths were already taking the initiative on their own to integrate churches. beginning in Atlanta in 1960.[79] These protests were what Stephen Haynes called "moral spectacles of exclusion and embrace."[80] As one protestor put it, "Our presence…is itself an act of worship…The presentation of our bodies a symbol of the church's tragic rejection of the gospel message of brotherhood and love."[81] The kneel-ins drew large amounts of press in

[76]"White Christian Civil Righter Asks: 'What can Christian do?'" Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition), Jul 18, 1963.

[77]Reimers, White Protestantism and the Negro, 178

[78]Spike, "Our Churches' Sin," 30.

[79] Haynes, The Last Segregated Hour, 12.

[80] Ibid, 14.

[81] Ibid.

proportion to their small scale because they made segregation an immediate, tangible problem to churches trying to avoid action. The YMCA and YWCA were also making comparatively rapid progress in integration, led by Frank T. Nelson, the National Student Secretary of the YMCA, who identified the link between class and race discrimination, saying with venom, "The more affluent the pillars of the church, the more efficient the screenings of 'undesirables.' In this process of preserving the purity of the faithful, race and color have been touchstones of acceptance or rejection."[82] It was movements like these which nagged at the consciousness of the comparatively sluggish NCC, who were realizing that unless they joined the fight now, on their own terms, the fight would be brought to them. Their window for being civil rights heroes rather than villains was closing quickly.

The NCC's March on Washington delegation seemed paltry in comparison to the expansiveness of the NCC's next angle of attack, the Midwest Strategy. The debate around the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a concrete goal the NCC could work towards and work they did, adopting a specifically midwestern strategy of swaying local white Christians to write to their congressmen, lobbying for the passage of the bill. The Midwest Strategy showed the NCC finally discarding the shackles of the belief that religious leaders should not explicitly influence politics. This direct involvement in passing a specific act was a hard turn from its agenda in the 1950s, when funding for political activity was low and the NCC's Washington office was explicitly forbidden from making any "decision regarding policy."[83] Henry J. Pratt argues that this change in the NCC's style of leadership came largely from pragmatism, namely, "a growing awareness among leading churchmen of the continued diminution in Protestantism's societal position and a concern that accepted social action strategies, though appropriate in an earlier period, might now have become insufficient to the task at hand."[84] Ditching the conventional methods, the NCC entered the midwestern church milieu attempting to simultaneously defend civil rights and the precarious position of the religion they represented in the American social hierarchy.

This was the first time the NCC took the lead in a grassroots organizing initiative and they resolved not to come up short this time. They chose the Midwest for several reasons: many of the congressmen there were undecided about the bill, Protestantism had deep roots there which could be used to convince ordinary citizens and the congressmen, and there was little presence of black voters or activist groups to make direct contact with the largely rural and homogenous population who were unconcerned with civil rights; for most white Midwesterners, the CRM had little effect on their daily lives. This new leadership role was also a chance to form connections with other activist groups; Charles Cobb and Thomas L. Brown of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) joined the effort.[85] James Findlay surveyed the archival records of Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, the legislator in large part responsible for getting congressmen on board with the bill as

[82] Frank T. Wilson, "Golgotha 1964," in Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement, ed. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2006), 628.

[83] Pratt, "The Growth of Political Activism," 331.

[84] Pratt, "The Growth of Political Activism," 333.

well as of four undecided midwestern legislators, three of whom ended up voting for the Civil Rights Act: Senators Everett Dickson of Illinois, and Bourke Hickenlooper of Iowa, and Representatives James Bromwell of Iowa and Charles Halleck of Indiana.[86] His research showed that hundreds of church people had written to these congressmen urging for the passage of the act.[87]

The Midwest Strategy represented the best of the white religious community during the CRM. As Findlay noted, "The political power of the liberal religious community was never again mobilized so fully and effectively as it was in 1963 and 1964."88 The effort began with a nine-state "legislative conference," which emphasized the need for religious leadership in passing the Civil Rights Act and set up "Civil Rights Workshops" throughout the Midwest.[89] Teams of activists, ministers, and legal experts were sent to churches in critical voting areas to hold workshops with clergymen, teaching them how to discuss the CRM and the Civil Rights Act and to answer questions and persuade parishioners to write to their congressmen, making moral and religious appeals to vote for the bill. The NCC also sent delegations to Congress to lobby congressmen directly and to hold prayer demonstrations outside the Capitol. Eugene Carson Blake testified before Congress and delegation members continued putting pressure on the congressmen directly.[90] Nearly every undecided midwestern congressmen voted for the bill and Hubert Humphrey wrote to thank the NCC for its efforts, saying that without them, "this bill could never have become law."[91] While it is impossible to gauge exactly which influences helped these lawmakers decide to vote the way they did, this was a huge victory for the members of the NCC, a vindication of their strategies, and a salve on their consciousness. They had put their words into action.

Mississippi became another area of focus for the NCC in the 1960s. It began with sending a delegation to the funeral of Medgar Evers, the state director of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who was assassinated on June 11, 1963. There, the NAACP requested the delegation's help in changing minds in the town of Clarksdale, but they were immediately rebuffed by the white locals.[92] They found a more effective approach by providing bail money and legal aid to black activists who had been arrested in protests in Mississippi. They formed a close connection with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) based on shared goals and mutual necessity, as well as admiration. Robert Spike admired SNCC's militancy and organizing capabilities and SNCC leader Robert Moses found the presence of white, upper class workers beneficial to garnering media attention.[93] Over a hundred ministers converged on Hattiesburg, Mississippi, to demonstrate and canvass for black voter registration.

The NCC also used its resources to help

85 Findlay, Church People, 80.
86 James Findlay, "Religion and Politics in the Sixties: The Churches and the Civil Rights Act of 1964." The Journal of American History 77, no. 1 (1990): 66-92.
87 Findlay, "Religion and Politics," 82.
88 Findlay, Church People, 64.
89 Findlay, "Religion and Politics," 72.
90 Ibid, 77.
91 Ibid, 88.
92 Findlay, Church People, 79.
93 Ibid, 80.

SNCC prepare for the Freedom Summer activities of 1964, this time completely acknowledging their inexperience with such matters and taking a backseat to the organizing of SNCC. The NCC served as "facilitators and enablers,"[94] not as leaders or even as camera-friendly symbols. They helped provide meeting spaces, cars, legal defense, and occasionally chipped in a few words of advice. However, it was also during this time that Edwin Espy, the general secretary of the NCC, turned over a list of names of activists and citizens involved in the Freedom Summer to J. Edgar Hoover in order to be perceived as anti-communist.[95] This was to many a betrayal and an unpleasant revelation of the hierarchy of priorities of many northern liberals during the CRM, who would moderate their views and pull back into their own privilege in order to avoid any suspicion of communism. This was much less of an issue for SNCC, whose young members put racial equality before arbitrary ideological categorizations.

Following the killings of James Cheney, Mickey Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman on June 21, 1964, the NCC organized the placement of "minister-counselors" in communities where activist programs were taking place. These were not meant to be leaders, but simply restraints on violence as both the NCC and SNCC believed that the presence of clergy would be able to "Spread oil on troubled waters."[96] Around 275 counselors were brought in, including some women, laypeople and Jews, although none stayed past August 1964, when the Freedom Summer drew to a close. Few of the volunteers from the North knew how complicated the mess of hate they were getting themselves into was and were relieved to relieved to leave, albeit with an altered perception of just how pervasive the inequality still was. One recalled, "I felt that I had been in hell for three weeks. I came home with double pneumonia and total exhaustion."[97] It was one of the few times in American history in which whites trusted only blacks and feared local whites. The black activists were often suspicious and sometimes resentful of the presence of the inexperienced whites, but the stress and necessary solidarity of the ensuing activities helped build bonds of experience. A white minister recalled that at the beginning of the Freedom Summer, "a Negro minister told me, 'I will hate you this summer, but forgive me.'"[98]

Besides their frequent testimonies that they were acting out of a Christian duty and that their work was making them feel like good Christians, the ministers rarely performed any specifically religious roles. Many in Mississippi joined black churches for their worship because they were rejected from the white churches - even bodily thrown out in one instance.[99] This interaction, both in religious and secular contexts, did give many staff and volunteers a profound sense of fulfillment of their Christian duty in accordance with the Social Gospel. One participant recalled, "I felt like I was where history was, that my role as a young clergyman was much in keeping with the Old Testament prophets."[100] The main challenge of any organization challenging segregation during the CRM was making white Southerners realize that segregation was a problem in the first place, not a solution as they overwhelmingly believed. Boycotts presented

[94] Ibid, 85.
[95] Ibid, 87.
[96] Findlay, Church People, 89.
[97] Ibid, 89.
[98] Ibid, 97.
[99] Ibid, 94.
[100] Ibid, 99.

it as an economic problem. The World War II Double Victory Campaign, which called for the defeat of racism both abroad and at home, presented it as a patriotic problem. Organizations like the NAACP presented it as a legal problem. Organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and SNCC presented it as a moral problem. And the NCC presented it as a moral and religious problem. An editorialist writing in the 1960 issue of The Student Voice (SNCC's official newsletter) said, "Throughout the years, the white Southerner has failed to realize the moral wrongness of segregation because the problem of segregation has not been presented to him as a moral problem."[101] This was where the NCC's power lay.

The NCC did not completely abandon Mississippi after the Freedom Summer. The most committed activists remained to help found the Delta Ministry, a small interracial church in one of the most segregated parts of Mississippi. The director was NCC staff member Arthur Thomas, a respected Methodist minister who had successfully organized an interracial church in Durham, NC, and the assistant director was Warren McKenna, another NCC member who had proven himself by running minister-counselor workshops during the Freedom Summer. The staff was nearly completely representative of mainline Protestantism with members of every major branch, and even included a Jewish layperson.102 However, the staff, while fully integrated, was nearly and even included a Jewish layperson.102 However, the staff, while fully integrated, was nearly all male except for a few secretaries, leaving many women, including the wives of the organizers, excluded from the process.[103] The Delta Ministry, in a departure from similar Christian organizations elsewhere, devoted none of its resources to missionary work - conversion was never its purpose. Instead, they intended to be a servant of the people, letting the local black population express their needs and developing programs to meet them. The most direct assistance program was that to provide food and clothing using NCC funding and donations from outside churches. It also successfully lobbied federal and state governments to increase Food Stamp and Distribution programs. The NCC staff partnered with the SNCC, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to continue voter registration efforts and to create a Freedom Information Service, a news bureau to distribute political news to the community. The Ministry also supported the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) a summer education program created using new Head Start funding in 1965.[104] The Ministry provided staff, logistics, lobbying for continued funding, and secured sponsorship from Mary Holmes College since the state government refused to sponsor the program.[105]

The NCC remained in the background the entire time, deferring to local leadership, with none of its staff being outspoken or straying from the mission of remaining a cooperative servant. All of these programs involved intimate and constant participation of the Delta community, especially from parents. This cooperation ensured that the Ministry formed close bonds with the

[101] Haynes, The Last Segregated Hour, 13.
[102] Findlay, Church People, 118
[103] Ibid, 119.
[104] Findlay, Church People, 127.
[105] Ibid, 127.

community it served and that everyone was involved in the decision-making process. This was a radical twist for the majority-black community. For decades, its laws and policies were imposed on it by politicians chosen in elections they could not participate in. Even when activist groups like SNCC arrived to fight for their political rights, the members of the community rarely had a voice in these activities. The CDGM provided education and jobs where none existed before and the voter registration initiatives allowed the community greater participation in the political process.

While the leadership of the Delta Ministry was NCC staff and received support from the national organization, it became a unique and mostly independent group. Meanwhile, the national leadership of the NCC was turning to broader issues of race relations, rather than focusing on small towns in the South. Between its work with SNCC and its efforts to gather support for the Civil Rights Act in the Midwest, the NCC had earned enough prestige and publicity to participate in upper-level discussions, sitting in during presidential addresses to congress and communicating with President Johnson himself.[106]

However, in September 1965, Robert Spike resigned as head of the Commission on Religion and Race. One year later, he was murdered for unknown motives. Theories postulate that the government could have been involved, or just a community member angered by his activism. It could also have been a result of the rampant homophobia which existed in the church and in the police department, for Spike was bisexual, although it is unknown just how common this knowledge was.[107]

Spike was replaced by Benjamin Payton, a young, black minister from the South, three characteristics which were lacking in the NCC leadership. While the organization was no longer as segregated as it had been in the 1950s, the leadership was still predominantly white and hesitant to engage with the emerging rise of black power rhetoric in civil rights discourses.[108] Not only were white leaders unsure of where they fit into a movement defined by black power rather than common brotherhood, but they were acutely aware of the PR effects of siding with a more militant organization. Black Power had been linked to the increasingly frequent instances of urban unrest and rioting, and as such, scared off the allegiances and dollars of white liberals. Payton however, was less fearful, and helped organize the National Commission of Black Churchmen (NCBC) (originally the National Commission of Negro Churchmen), which became "the principal mainstream ecumenical church group advocated black power concepts and strategies throughout the rest of the sixties."[109] The NCBC was not as radical as other Black Power leaders like Stokely Carmichael; it still promoted integration and working within the existing system. It stressed the hypocrisy of the white churches who continued to refuse to fully integrate, lamenting the very circumstances that made the Black Power Movement (BPM) necessary in the first place, saying, "As black men who were long ago forced out of the white church to create and to wield 'black power,' we fail to understand the emotional quality of the outcry of some [white] clergy against the use of the term

[106] Findlay, Church People, 136

[107] Ibid, 176.
[108] Ibid, 177.
[109] Findlay, Church People, 184.

today."[110] The NCBC was the first ecumenical organization to address the historical roots of church segregation, recognizing both the social and religious divisions between the black and white church, elaborating, "the Negro Church was created as a result of the refusal to submit to the indignities of a false kind of 'integration' in which all power was in the hands of white people. A more equal sharing of power is precisely what is required as the precondition of authentic human interaction."[111] The NCBC, while still retaining a hope that an equal sharing of power was possible, was issuing the same criticisms of white leadership and co-optation as groups like SNCC.

As movements like the NCBC shifted the conditions and expectations for equality, the rhetoric of the NCC shifted as well from simplistic messages of brotherhood to more complex arguments tackling the roots of inequality, in particular de facto housing segregation. Robert Spike, for example, showcased the first message when he called on church people to pray for "all those who fear their fellows of a different color or station. What a waste of power, what a foolishness of mind!"[112] Later into his tenure, he added economic criticisms such as "The area of greatest concentration for congregations (particularly in the suburbs) ought to be housing. If congregations would really take the lead toward open housing, the problem could virtually be licked in five years' time."[113] His successor, Benjamin Payton, began his tenure with an ambitious plan for the future, calling for a "program of economic development to make civil rights real, in housing, employment, education, and health care."[114] Payton drew up a concrete plan with Seymour Melman, an industrial-engineering professor, to reconstruct metropolitan centers to provide exactly these things in a more efficient way.[115] While these blueprints contributed to the NCBC's platform on urban restructuring, it was more a hypothetical ideal than a concrete plan of action.

The membership of the NCC was becoming increasingly polarized on how to approach these new calls for equality and black power. In 1967, the Commission on Religion and Race was swallowed by a new Department of Social Justice and Benjamin Payton resigned shortly thereafter, putting an unofficial end to the civil rights fervor which had consumed the NCC four years earlier. The actions of the NCC reverted back to ineffectual statements and public relations stunts, such as the "Crisis in the Nation" program, which attempted to address urban disturbances.116 The fear of communism still pervaded these efforts. Spike had predicted these fears before his death and tried to convince church leaders to shrug them off and take the lead in coming to a peaceful resolution, saying:

> Most white people…are easily convinced that all change is a plot to undermine their security. The charges of "Communist" and "Red" will fill the air when those trapped in the ghetto organize to protest or to register their opinions politically. But the churches must interpret the meanings of events in a city in their moral and theological dimensions.[117]

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[110] National Committee of Negro Churchmen, "Black Power Statement," in Black Theology: A Documentary History, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979): 25.
[111] Ibid, 25.
[112] Findlay, Church People, 77.
113 Spike, "Our Churches' Sin," 30.
[114] Findlay, Church People, 178
[115] Ibid, 180.
[116] Findlay, Church People, 188.
[117] Spike, "Our Churches' Sin," 30.

Nevertheless, the NCC had lost its stomach for race relations and began devoting its energies to other societal issues, most notably, opposing the war in Vietnam. A thorough analysis of the NCC's involvement with anti-Vietnam movements and contentious objectors is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting that the NCC believed that taking a stance on Vietnam would be the best way to revive its ecumenical spirit domestically and form stronger bonds with ecumenical organizations abroad.[118]

After a tumultuous summer in 1967, the NCC held the Conference on the Church and Religious Tensions and for the first time in NCC conference history, the white and black delegations voluntarily separated into their own caucuses. This was a major blow to an organization which had founded itself on principles of desegregation. The preamble of the conference grappled with the inescapable conclusion that while religiously, all men are brethren, made One by God, the goals and priorities of black and white Christians had drifted too far apart for this to be true socially, even among friends. They "discovered that in order to learn the truth about ourselves and our situation, so successfully covered over by years of hypocrisy and dissimulation, we had to make a decision unprecedented in ecumenical conferences under the aegis of the National Council."[119] As David Chappell explained this fracturing, "the alliance between black Christian civil rights groups and American liberals was more an alliance of convenience than one of deep ideological affinity."[120] Each caucus released a statement of their aims for the future. The black churchmen affirmed their solidarity with the BPM and called on the white churches to do the same. They also called attention to the subtle mental colonization of belonging to an organization with white leadership in a white-dominated society worshipping a religion reverse-engineered by whites to maintain white supremacy. They saw themselves as complicit in unwittingly contaminating the black church with white influence, and saw the BPM as a key to liberation, saying, "We rejoice in the Black Power Movement, which is not only the renewed hope for Black People, but gives the Black Church once again, its reason for existing."[121] The statement finished with a call for the NCBC to become more independent and expand to assist the BPM financially and logistically as the NCC had done in Mississippi just three years ago, and, most tellingly of all, to remove all images suggesting that God is white. The Declaration of White Churchmen was less than half a page long, and admitted white complicity in the urban riots, hoped that the two could work in synergy, and resigned themselves to the increasingly permanent split.[122] Its tone was deflated and pessimistic; the white church had lost its motivation as it had after abolition, a century earlier.

The final nail in the coffin for the NCC's involvement in race relations was the polarizing Black Manifesto speech given by James Foreman, the former executive secretary of SNCC. At the National Black Economic Development

118 Gill, Embattled Ecumenism, 6.

119 Black and White Caucuses, National Council of Churches Conference, "The Church and the Urban Crisis" in Black Theology: A Documentary History, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979): 43-44.

120 Chappell, Stone of Hope, 4.

121 Black Caucus, "The Church and the Urban Crisis," 46.

122 Black Caucus, "The Church and the Urban Crisis," 46-47.

Conference, a gathering in April 1969 partially organized by the NCC, Foreman gave a stinging critique of white churches, espoused a Marxist plan for the redistribution of wealth and gave a list of demands to the white churches and synagogues of America – the most eye-catching of which was $500 million in reparations.[123] He believed that the White Church had a special guilt among American institutions as it was complicit in forming the racial capitalism which profited off of black labor and oppression. Foreman dramatized these demands over the next several months, interrupting Sunday services in churches in urban centers to read his manifesto, earning him publicity and media attention. He and his supporters continued demonstrating outside church centers including the NCC's Interchurch Center, provoking the trustees of the Interchurch Center to issue a restraining order and to propose an injunction, which the Council rejected.[124] These methods were not entirely unsuccessful; Foreman was able to pressure larger church organizations into donating over $1 million to his economic initiative by 1970.[125]

While many in the NCC outright disagreed with Foreman, even those who did agree were uncomfortable with the blatant Marxism of the Manifesto and the confrontational methods he used to seek his goals. Foreman's efforts were reminiscent in the minds of many white members of the urban riots. A Gallup poll also revealed an overwhelming opposition to the demanded reparations among white churchgoers and a 52% opposition among black churchgoers.[126] The NCC was hesitant to oppose popular opinion. By contrast, the NCBC, which Payton had helped form, endorsed the Manifesto, saying that by paying reparations, white churches would" demonstrate to other American institutions the authenticity of their frequently verbalized contrition and of their faith in the justice of God," explicitly linking Christian faith with reparations.[127] One of the NCBC leaders, Gayraud Wilmore, articulated clearly what this meant for church institutions, that the split over Black Power, "completed the destruction of integrationism as the dominant theology of the black community. In 1969 it was time for white churchmen to face this fact unblinkingly. The quest for racial integration…has come to an end."[128]

In an effort to compromise, the NCC attempted to form a mutual fund and organization to help secure financial support for black economic initiatives: The Project on Minority Group Social and Economic Development. This effort collapsed at the last minute when the fund management company backed off. Meanwhile, Protestantism as a whole was losing its foothold as a central pillar of the American social scene. Church memberships were falling, as were contributions to the NCC, which had to cut back its budget. The 1970s saw the NCC shift back into autopilot, taking few new actions in racial issues. Findlay suggests that this tapering off comes from the fact that unlike the grassroots civil rights movements of black churches, the NCC's actions were elitist and led from the top, indeed often going against the

[123] James Foreman, "The Black Manifesto," in Black Theology: A Documentary History, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979): 84.

[124] Findlay, Church People, 205. 125 Findlay, Church People, 212. 126 Ibid, 206.

127 Ibid, 208.

[128] Gayraud Wilmore, "The Church's Response to the Black Manifesto," (1969): 3.

desires of the local whites with whom they worked.[129] Once the top ministers and council members backed off, there was no one left to stoke the revolutionary flame.

I would argue that the NCC was doomed from the beginning to collapse on the issue of Civil Rights for two main reasons. First, Findlay correctly points out the disconnection between the leadership and the base. To this, I would add a second: the NCC's inability to confront the racist heritage of its moral compass: American Protestantism. The statements of leaders like J. Oscar Lee and Robert Spike showed an acute awareness of the social and political reasons why the church was segregated, but not the religious reasons. They were aware of the church's complicity in the racial hierarchy as a brick-and-mortar institution but failed to fully examine its theological complicity in the beliefs it continued to propound. After abolition, the black and white churches became separate not only geographically, but religiously. The role of religion in the formation of America's racial landscape is one of the great historical paradoxes; black and white churches were reading the same book and yet took such vastly different lessons away from it. Black churches thought about race every single day for centuries because it always had an immediate impact on their existence. This is not to say that they always agreed on issues of race – many black ministers strongly disagreed with Martin Luther King and the SCLC – but when the moment for revolution arrived, black churches were at the forefront while white churches cowered in the background. It was as SNCC claimed, that white organizations could never be Civil Rights leaders because they were unable to swim too far from the shore, to give up too much of their institutionalized privilege. SNCC's famous Position Paper on Black Power was almost prophetic, saying that whites could not lead the movement in part because "they cannot relate to the black religious experience, nor to the black church unless, of course, this church has taken on white manifestations."[130]

From day one, the NCC ignored the spiritual leaps and bounds made by black churches and assumed that the Protestantism that would guide them would be white Protestantism. White Protestantism was still a neophyte in addressing race in a way not tainted by Cotton Mather's slavery optimization, which had festered in white divinity schools for centuries. It is unclear what the NCC's response was to the 1967 Black Caucus's demand that white images of God be removed, but it was clear that this was an issue they would never have considered as long as they embraced the white brand of Protestantism. Black churches, in their minds, represented a wayward, lower-class form of Christianity which black religious leaders must outgrow. And those black religious leaders were expected to fully abandon their backgrounds and fall in line. Gayraud Wilmore put it best when he wrote that the NCC was "never altogether comfortable with black leadership because [they] were never really members of 'the club.' They came out of strange, 'Native Son' backgrounds and attended theological schools most White people had never heard of." Wilmore continued, linking the contemporary racist ideas critiqued by Richard Wright's Native Son with the racist, community-destroying ideas of the slavery era:

But the Whites were confident, too

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[129] Findlay, Church People, 223.

[130] Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, "Position Paper on Black Power," in Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan, ed William L. Van Deburg (New York: New York University Press, 1997): 120.

> confident, that in a crisis these Black leaders would conform to the stipulations of White Protestantism. They were presumed to be 'house n******' who associated with the 'field n******' after office hours but did not share their sectarian biases and mistrust of White people.[131]

Wilmore hoped that by pointing out the mechanisms by which black Christians were expected to conform to white norms, they could avoid these pitfalls in the future. The NCC had focused too much on integrating black Christians into the white church structure and not enough on erasing the hierarchy which followed them, even into integrated churches. Black Christians remained on the margins and would continue to do so until the NCC was willing to incorporate their ideological beliefs, which the NCC never did. They were "oblivious to the heterodox and rebellious currents that ran through the ranks of Black Christians," fating them to reproduce a mental segregation of Christianity along racial lines which exists still today.[132]

The NCC has remained firmly on the political left, taking numerous other stances on societal debates, such as supporting the National Anti-Klan Network, and opposing nuclear proliferation, states-rights in issues of school prayer and abortion, President Reagan's proposed amendment to require a balanced budget, and arming the Nicaraguan Contras.[133] It has grown to become the largest ecumenical organization in the United States, spanning 38 Protestant and Eastern Orthodox communions as full members and over 45 million churchgoers.[134] But it has never returned to directly address church segregation and the history behind it.

Conclusion

The NCC is an excellent case study in how activism is hindered by the vested interests of the activists, especially, but not exclusively, white activists. White members of the NCC had much less personal stake in the success of integration and achieving social equality for African Americans. In fact, whether they consciously recognized it or not, they stood to lose their hallowed place at the top of the social hierarchy, which limited their horizons. They mostly viewed integration as a relatively simple fix – changing outdated attitudes – without ever delving into the extent of the structural damage those attitudes caused or the history of where those attitudes came from for do to so would be to implicate themselves and lose their credentials as saviors. Those savior aspirations came from the very Christian ideologies which had caused so much of the problem in the first place during the era of slavery. Cotton Mather's advocacy to save slaves' souls at the expense of their bodies created a rift between black and white Protestantism which has not been fully reconciled to this day.

The NCC did prove that religion was and still is an immensely powerful force for communicating messages of change and that any movement which desires to effect a revolution in the hearts and minds of the American people cannot overlook the moral role which religion plays in the daily lives of millions. Religion, specifically Protestantism, has

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[131] Gayraud Wilmore, "The Attack on White Religion: Introduction," in Black Theology: A Documentary History, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979): 71.

[132] Wilmore, "The Attack on White Religion," 71.

[133] Marjorie Hyer, "Church Council Opposes Laws to Bypass Courts," The Washington Post (1974-Current File), Nov 06, 1982.

[134] Encyclopedia Britannica, "National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.," Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., April 4, 2019.

specifically Protestantism, has always been tied to politics despite the US's nominal separation of church and state. American religious leaders, national and local, wield tremendous influence in what their constituents believe to be moral and normative and therefore have a responsibility to assess the history of their own beliefs. Religious institutions are still forming their own identity along with that of their constituents and it is important that such a crucial part of their history be recognized and reckoned with as part of that formation. The NCC is larger than ever and still has the potential to effect change through its powerful dialogue between Christian denominations. However, if white churches (and other places of worship outside the scope of this paper) maintain a "coalition of silence," with regards to their recent civil rights history, "they can lose or renarrativize threatening memories from the past."[135] The NCC teaches us that racial conservatism is neither static, nor all-consuming. In today's social and political landscape, "the racist is a spoiled or stigmatized identity; separation from it is important;" and yet racism continues to flourish without racists.[136] This is because the racist heritage which laces many of the ostensibly race-neutral components of our personality, like religion, remains unexamined. This silence is what built up an inevitably insurmountable mental barrier for the NCC and prevented them from taking up the moral torch their societal position demanded of them during the most crucial time in their history.

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135 Gill, "Recalling a Difficult Past," 45.

136 Ibid, 45.

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