

**The Standoff: First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia, Robert McNeill,
and Racial Equality**

by

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Abstract

The civil rights movements of the mid-twentieth century touched every segment of American society. American churches were one central battle ground with opponents and supporters of integration leveraging biblical justifications. In the late-1950s the congregation of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia, lived through a season of deep hostilities, many of them centered on the idea of racial equality. Reverend Robert McNeill spoke openly in favor of social justice in relation to race relations and a vocal minority of his congregation opposed him. The story of the First Presbyterian Church illustrates one path Protestant ministers followed in supporting integration.

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Introduction

“The Christian...has in many instances reduced his faith to a God cult so monumental and complex that his ethics are derived more from his culture than his theology. This has been the Christian heresy of twentieth-century America.”¹

Robert Blakely McNeill wrote this observation in 1965 as he reflected on his time as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia. The book containing this observation, *God Wills Us Free: The Ordeal of a Southern Minister*, is McNeill’s autobiography but he primarily focuses on the “ordeal” of his time at First Presbyterian. In many ways, the situation at First Presbyterian was a conflict between the culture and theology to which McNeill alludes. White culture of the South in the 1950s endorsed segregation unapologetically and the church largely affirmed the practices of racial inequality. While at First Presbyterian, and later in his published works, McNeill wrestled with the role of the Protestant minister in society. He concluded that ministers were compelled both by their doctrine and leadership to advocate for social justice. Unfortunately, his outspoken stance drew hostile attention from members within his congregation. The conflicts that followed raised questions about the role of a pastor as spokesman for his church’s members, the place of southern Protestant churches in social issues, and the response of southern churches to civil rights activism.

¹ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free: The Ordeal of a Southern Minister* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), 169.

Columbus residents on all sides of the civil rights struggle deserve to have their stories told. This study considers one group of Columbus citizens and their responses to calls for racial equality. In late-1950s the members of one Columbus church acted and reacted to national events. Their responses and interactions forced the church leaders to examine their basic beliefs about freedom of the pulpit, Christian social responsibility, and racial justice. The events that challenged First Presbyterian in the 1950s are neither universal to all southern congregations nor completely exceptional. Other ministers expressed their support of modifying racial relationships, other churchmen questioned their pastor's ability to relate effectively to the congregation, and other churches felt the national spotlight's glaring heat. While the choices and actions of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia and the Reverend Robert McNeill cannot be held as a template, they do reveal certain modes of thought that guided southern church-goers as national attention focused on civil rights.

Southern church members exhibited a variety of responses to the civil rights movement in the 1950s. Some identified civil rights as an issue intimately connected to the doctrine of Christianity and advocated for social justice as an expression of Christian love. Some saw integration as a violation of God's natural order and fought for segregation. Still others believed religious convictions had no bearing on social conditions and held those two elements of their lives separate. When individuals with these various views interacted they frequently clashed and many of these conflicts took place within churches.

It is not surprising that churches figure prominently in accounts of the civil rights era. Historians and contemporaries note the church played a central role in the lives of

African Americans in the South, serving as both the figurative and literal center of the community. From the earliest days of organized civil rights movements, churches frequently housed meetings thereby protecting and inspiring movement workers. However, churches filled with movement supporters were not the only churches in the South and African Americans not the only southerners deeply invested in church life. While the significance of African American churches in the civil rights movement is clear, if not always simple, the involvement of white churches may be less readily apparent. Reviewing the full historiography of the civil rights movement is a monumental task, however, a brief look at some works that focus primarily on white churches during the civil rights era reveals some trends.

In *Church People in the Struggle: the National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950-1970* (1993) James Findlay cites over one hundred interviews and surveys he conducted during his research. He accounts for the involvement of primarily-white ecumenical protestant churches in the struggle for social justice. While Findlay's analysis focuses on white churches that supported civil rights efforts, he is careful not to overstate the importance of those churches in the movement lest they overshadow the efforts of African Americans. Donald Collins was a Methodist minister during the 1950s and 1960s and his *When the Church Bell Rang Racist: the Methodist Church and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (1998) is part memoir, part historical analysis. His account gives equal consideration to church members who supported the civil rights movement and those who opposed it. In *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"* (2001) Jonathan Bass studies the conversation between Martin

Luther King Jr. and eight members of the local white clergy held through published letters. He provides a detailed biography of each of the white churchmen and a close analysis of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Bass presents a multifaceted and sympathetic look at the clergy as he traces the factors in each life that led to each individual's stance in the struggles for social justice. Two works published in 2004 consider different stances of white religion in the civil rights movement. Jane Dailey's "Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*," looks closely at the theology of segregationists, especially as churchmen articulated in the years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. Dailey's study is unique as she allows segregationist theological rhetoric to stand in competition with integrationist theology, rather than treating the triumph of integration as a foregone conclusion. Also in 2004 Timothy Tyson published *Blood Done Sign My Name*, an autobiographical work in which Tyson considers the responses to civil rights achievements in the South through the lens of his own experiences. Combining autobiography and historical perspective, Tyson provides a compelling narrative with analytical depth. Tyson's father was a white Methodist preacher and the experiences of father and son related to the church form a central feature of the narrative.²

While each work is unique and each historian's argument nuanced, historians' accounts of white churches and church members in the civil rights movement tend to differ in three primary ways. As with any historical topic, historians who consider the roles of churches and church members do so in varying depth. The continuum ranges

² 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); Donald E. Collins, *When the Church Bell Rang Racist: the Methodist Church and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998); S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail,"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001); Jane Dailey, "Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004): 119-44. Da; Timothy B. Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name: A True Story* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004).

from historians who primarily focus on other issues of the civil rights movements and only mention white churches or church members in a cursory way; at the opposite extreme of the continuum are historians who choose to focus primarily on the actions of white churches. No historian has yet claimed that the efforts of white religious people were the primary factors in the civil-rights-era campaigns for social justice, but there is still a range of interpretation on the degree of importance. While some historians emphasize the roles of churches in impacting white opinion, leveraging political power, or supporting African American leaders, other historians nominalize the actions of white church members. These two dimensions of study – depth of analysis and estimation of contribution – typically work in tandem. A historian who devotes only brief mentions to white clergy would hardly contend that white churches were indispensable in the movement. In a third way, historians differ in which white church members they choose to consider – integrationists or segregationists. This can create some particularly messy battle lines when these two camps of whites shared the same pew.

This study focuses on the experiences of members in one white church. Reverend Robert McNeill pastored First Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Georgia from 1952 to 1959. The interactions among McNeill and the church leaders indicate some patterns of thought regarding the civil rights movement. Chapter one considers the development of Columbus, Georgia. The city was more than a simple backdrop for the conflict at First Presbyterian in the 1950s; the history of the city and the historical consciousness of its residents influenced the responses to the rising tensions of the late-1950s. The call for civil rights gained national attention throughout the 1950s and communities across the nation arrayed themselves for battle. Religious rhetoric served as a key device for

integrationists and segregationists. Chapter one considers how individuals, especially southerners, used religious language to defend and challenge segregation and concludes with a brief history of the First Presbyterian Church in Columbus.

Chapter two describes Robert McNeill's childhood and education. His upbringing in a segregated Birmingham neighborhood during the early decades of the twentieth century shaped his worldview. McNeill was further influenced by the religious culture around him. Historians and theologians agree that southern Protestantism has a unique character with some traits common among many of its denominations. Chapter two describes some characteristics of southern Protestantism, especially its approach to social justice. McNeill's formal education, including seminary, occurred in southern schools so he was deeply familiar with southern Protestant doctrine though not always guided by it. McNeill's writing and sermons prove he differed from many southern Protestants in his view of the prophetic and priestly duties of southern ministers. Chapter two provides some discussion of these duties and the difficulties pastors faced in balancing them.

When McNeill accepted the pastorate at First Presbyterian he brought his own expectations and concepts of his responsibilities. At times, his ideas conflicted with the expectations of the congregation and the early years of his ministry brought a mixture of triumphs and conflicts. The first two years of McNeill's time at First Presbyterian, 1952-1954, were largely peaceful but chapter two describes two major conflicts that opened a breach in his pastoral relationship. Both the resistance to the proposed Plan of Union, which would reunite the Northern and Southern Presbyterian churches after over ninety years of separation, and the hostility to hiring the Wells Organization financial

consultation firm laid the foundation for major confrontations to come. Though the church successfully accomplished some components of its mission, notably supporting mission churches in the area, the mid-1950s were a season of increasingly tense relations among the church's leadership.

Chapter three describes the height of the tension within First Presbyterian Church. Though hostility built for years, in 1957 open hostility erupted when McNeill published an essay on race relations in the national magazine *Look*. As the chapter shows, McNeill and the church's body of elders attempted to resolve their conflicts for nearly three years. Ultimately, they requested assistance from the Presbytery and submitted to the authority of a denominational Judicial Commission.

The conclusion provides a brief epilogue on McNeill, First Presbyterian, and Columbus after 1959. By his own admission, McNeill's time at First Presbyterian left a deep impression on his life. Was First Presbyterian equally shaped by the conflicts of the late-1950s? Through the 1960s and beyond First Presbyterian grew in membership and influence. Church records imply modified relations among church leaders after McNeill left the church. Also, some church members believed the experiences of the 1950s inoculated the congregation against the consequences of racial turmoil in the 1960s. This conclusion is difficult to prove but McNeill's tenure was the season when the church was most vocal about civil rights. The actions of First Presbyterian Church's members in the 1950s reflect the unique conditions in Columbus while conforming to trends in white churches across the South.

Chapter 1

“Certain Fields of Feeling”

The responses of the leadership at First Presbyterian Church in the 1950s were unique to that body. In one way the circumstances and reactions indicate patterns of behavior consistent throughout the region. There are certain similarities among Protestant church responses to pastoral action that indicate commonalities. Clearly, there was an element of southern Protestant culture that informed congregational responses across state and denominational boundaries. Still, McNeill and the elders of First Presbyterian perceived their situation through the filters of worldviews uniquely layered through their lifetimes. The church elders each brought personal experiences and a shared identity as members of the community and church. Many families whose names appear on the membership rolls of the 1890s were still active at First Presbyterian in the 1950s. These families were some of the most influential and affluent in Columbus. As a downtown church, First Presbyterian had a reputation and visibility that some other congregations did not. The histories of Columbus and First Presbyterian are linked since the city's development shaped the church's. The citizens of Columbus directed the growth of the city and the church and were, in turn, influenced by the society they created. The bifurcated society across the South chafed African Americans, and some whites, throughout the early twentieth century.

History of Columbus

In the 1950s, the simmering yearning for social justice boiled over and the era of civil rights began. Activists across the southern states confronted “the way things are done” and highlighted the nation’s failure to ensure equality for its citizens. In the annals of civil rights, Columbus does not hold a primary place. Though Columbus did not experience confrontations on the scale of Montgomery, Albany, or Birmingham, its citizens wrestled with the same issues. The citizens of Columbus confronted the questions of civil rights and the answers they provided changed their lives. As in every southern community residents of Columbus had to consider their social interactions and confront their assumptions about racially-driven policies and procedures.

Beginning in the cities earliest days, religious institutions formed a central element of Columbus’s development. The original city plans designated four lots near town center for religious purposes, one for each of the four denominations represented by the area’s population – Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, and Presbyterian. Four churches appeared on the city map dated June 21, 1828, a map drawn as a guide for the land auctions that occurred in July, indicating the lots designated for churches.³ At this time, however, there were no church buildings in the young city. The town’s commissioners established space for the churches at the physical center of the infant town. Either they felt religion should form a central element of the community or they believed the residents would demand churches. In either case, the development of religious institutions in Columbus was congruent with the development of other city entities. The

³ James J. Gilbert, *A History of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia during the first 100 of its existence* (1930; rept., Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, 1980), 7-10; Nancy Telfair, *A History of Columbus*, 30-1; Etta Blanchard Worsley, *Columbus on the Chattahoochee* (Columbus, GA: Columbus Office Supply Company, 1951), 59.

churches of Columbus did not graft into existing social networks but helped create those networks.

Though there were no church buildings in the new town in 1828, there was a religious presence and church buildings followed soon after the town's incorporation. The Methodist denomination was the first to have a presence in the community with missionaries beginning their efforts in 1826. The first Methodist church was organized in 1829, the same year as a Baptist church. An Episcopal church followed in 1834 and a Presbyterian church six years later.⁴ These first churches flourished and additional congregations joined their number. In 1889 there were seventeen churches in Columbus – seven Baptist, five Methodist, one Christian, one Episcopal, one Presbyterian, one Catholic, and one Jewish Synagogue. Religious life in Columbus continued to grow and in 1941, there were 144 churches in Muscogee County, eighty-one for white people and sixty-three for African Americans.⁵ Religious life in Columbus, like all southern life, was segregated through the mid-twentieth century. Churches formed central elements of the black and white communities.

Physically industrial manufacturing complexes dominated Columbus. Columbus's early industrial success relied on the Chattahoochee River. The falls in the river created ideal conditions for hydraulic, and later hydroelectric, manufacturing. During the Reconstruction period many of the industries destroyed during the Civil War were rebuilt and several others established anew. Manufacturing companies thriving in the 1880s include the Southern Plow Works, an affiliate of the Columbus Iron Works, was producing agricultural implements; several textile mills including the Columbus

⁴ Telfair, *A History of Columbus*, 30-1, 40-3.

⁵ Worsley, *Columbus on the Chattahoochee*, 381-382.

Manufacturing Co., Muscogee Manufacturing Co., and Swift Manufacturing Co. were producing cloth and yarn; the Eagle Manufacturing Co. rebuilt after being decimated in 1865 taking the new name of Eagle and Phenix Manufacturing Co., to signify its rebirth from the ashes. Other firms found success in the Reconstruction era and beyond, including W.C. Bradley Company, a firm with various enterprises; Golden's Foundry; Lummus Industries, a machine supply company; C. Schomburg and Son, a jeweler; Chancellor's, a men's clothing store; Kirven's, a clothing store; and The Harvey Lumber Company. Each of these businesses thrived into the twentieth century; several, including W.C. Bradley Company, Golden's Foundry, and Schomburg Jewelers continued successfully through the twentieth century. Several successful firms in Columbus were family businesses. Their success created a nucleus of successful families invested in the welfare of Columbus's economy who drew power from their ancestors' legacies.

Citizens of Columbus have a long memory, as the Battle of Columbus illustrates. During the Civil War there were no battles fought in or near Columbus. In April 1865, Columbus looked the way it had at the war's beginning. Industry had shifted to war-time production and residents had economized to increase their ability to contribute to the war effort. Most male residents of the appropriate age joined the Confederate Army early in the way, but the physical footprint of Columbus remained relatively unchanged in early-1865. Then came the Battle of Columbus, remembered by many locals as the "last battle of the War Between the States," though the battle actually occurred after General Lee's surrender on April 9.⁶ On Easter Sunday, April 16, 1865, Federal troops under the command of Major-General James H. Wilson marched from east Alabama toward the

⁶ Worsley, *Columbus on the Chattahoochee*, 293; Contemporary reports of Union Generals also refer to this battle as the last of the war.

Chattahoochee River and Columbus. General Wilson was unaware of the recent surrender, as were the residents of Columbus who braced for his attack. The battle itself was less-than-glorious as the troops defending Columbus were too thinly distributed, and poorly trained, to be effective. During the battle, several companies of the Iowa cavalry made their way on foot behind the southern lines and showed themselves at an undefended point down the river. To meet this group, the Confederate troops began a “stampede for the bridge” but were unable to effectively resist the Federal advance. General Wilson’s troops captured Columbus and destroyed much of the city’s industry. General Wilson remained in command of the city during the early days of Reconstruction.⁷

For generations, citizens remembered the Battle of Columbus with pride as a pivotal, if overlooked, moment in the Civil War. As 2011 approached, the nation prepared to commemorate the sesquicentennial of the Civil War and the Battle of Columbus returned to the news with the publication of a new book about the battle; the book proved so popular that its initial shipment sold in under an hour and the author held a second book-signing.⁸ As in communities throughout the South, Columbus’s memories of the atrocities of the Civil War and insults of Reconstruction remained strong well into the twentieth century.

⁷ Worsley, *Columbus on the Chattahoochee*, 293-6; Margaret Laney Whitehead and Barbara Bogart, *City of Progress: A History of Columbus, Georgia* (Columbus: Columbus Office Supply Co., 1978), 116.

⁸ Sandra Okamoto, “The Most Comprehensive Book About the Battle of Columbus Will Be Unveiled March 20,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, March 1, 2010; Sandra Okamoto, “Charles Misulia, Author of New Battle of Columbus Book, Returns for Another Book Signing April 7,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, March 30, 2010; Charles A. Misulia, *Columbus, Georgia, 1865: The Last True Battle of the Civil War*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010; Near the 150-year anniversary of the battle, a Columbus newspaper article reminded citizens of the link between the battle and the invention of Coca-Cola, namely if Dr. John Pemberton, who fought in the battle, had been killed in the Battle of Columbus he would not have invented the beverage, John M. House, “The Battle of Columbus Almost Cost Us Coca-Cola,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, April 16, 2011.

Memory does not in itself assign value. The citizens of Columbus did more than remember their heritage, they revered it. The Battle of Columbus is one example of the attachment citizens develop to elements of their past obvious in many instances. First Presbyterian's consistent membership and the enduring success of local businesses point to the same kind of reverence for tradition. Through the early decades of the twentieth century Columbus residents built a community informed by their memories and perceptions of their past. One significant element of this past was race relations. Columbus's white residents sought to maintain race relationships that fit their memories of how white and blacks traditionally interacted. These interactions were tied to their heritage and, therefore, their identity. African American citizens shared many memories with white citizens but had strikingly different interpretations. Southern society was tiered so that it was difficult for blacks and whites to share experiences. Undoubtedly, African Americans always resented racial prejudice but in the mid-twentieth century that resentment spurred action like never before.

Rising Racial Tension: 1940s-1950s

The truism that war changes people is no less true because it is familiar. Soldiers returned from World War II, as soldiers return from all wars, with memories and experiences yet to process. Many American soldiers returned to their homes in the late-1940s having worked in racially-integrated situations for the first time. Some white soldiers fought beside African American soldiers and returned home with the conviction that Jim-Crow segregation was "narrow-minded childishness."⁹ The experiences of

⁹ Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 19.

white and African American soldiers in integrated living conditions made many of these soldiers more aware of segregation at home.

On the home front, too, some citizens became dissatisfied with the status of race relations and began to challenge established social relationships. Columbus was the battle ground for one of these early skirmishes. On July 4, 1944, Primus King, attempted to vote in the Georgia Democratic Party primary. African American leaders in the community developed the idea of a test case for voting rights in Columbus. None of the more affluent members of the community were willing to attempt voting. King would not share the names of these men but remembers riding with them to the Columbus Consolidated Government building on July 4. The two cars full of men who encouraged King to vote sped away as detectives seized King outside the polling place. King immediately engaged a lawyer and sued for the right to vote, and his case eventually went to the US Court of Appeals where the court ordered the end of white primaries in Georgia.¹⁰

Though the King case's place in popular memory is largely overshadowed by the *Smith v. Allwright* decision from the Supreme Court earlier in 1944, it was a precedential ruling for Georgia. Columbus NAACP members were inspired to attempt a test of the Supreme Court's ruling and found a willing volunteer in King.¹¹ His case cleared a path for voting rights campaigns across the state.¹² For the first time since Reconstruction,

¹⁰ Judith Grant, *Black America Series: Columbus, Georgia* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2000), 29; Primus King, interviewed by Paul A. Davis, July 16, 1979, transcript, General Oral History Collection, Columbus State University Archives, Columbus, GA.

¹¹ Dr. Thomas Brewer, a leader in the African American community and officer in the NAACP, was a primary force in organizing King's voting effort. In 1956 Dr. Brewer was murdered by a white storekeeper and the ensuing trial further strained race relations in the community.

¹² Stephen G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 41.

black Georgians could use voting as a mechanism to express their dissatisfaction and effect change. Throughout the late-1940s and early-1950s activists increasingly began to challenge racially-tiered society. Law suits and judicial rulings became a key mechanism for attacking de facto and de jure discrimination.

In 1954 the US Supreme Court announced its decision in the case *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. When the justices determined segregation of education facilities based on race an unconstitutional practice they touched the lives of every American. Though all states heard the call for “all deliberate speed” in the integration of public schools, they colored the phrase with so many shades of meaning that it was obscured beyond recognition. The Court’s historic ruling and the staunch resistance that met it brought the issues of civil rights to the forefront of the national conscience.

The *Brown* decision was a secular one, but the debate over its implications often employed spiritual language. All sides of the argument regarding school desegregation appropriated sacred justifications.¹³ Civil rights leaders believed they were upheld by divine favor in the righteous cause of ending segregation. These leaders, black and white, believed their segregationist counterparts were guilty of “heresy” and a violation of God’s law as expressed in his Word.¹⁴ Many proponents of integration referred to the teachings of the Apostle Paul that the church is one body, fully united and equal, with no differentiation based on station in life.¹⁵ In these statements, integrationists saw clear instruction on the primacy of social equality in the Christian faith. However,

¹³ Jane Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*,” 119-44.

¹⁴ McNeill, *God Wills us Free*, 169; Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*”; Michael B. Friedland, *Lift up Your Voice Like a Trumpet: White Clergy and the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements, 1954-1973* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 46.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:12-20, Ephesians 4:1-6, Colossians 3:11.

segregationists also held church memberships and they too read the Bible, drawing conclusions that convinced them of biblical endorsement of segregation. Segregationist theologians believed the “oneness” Paul describes was a spiritual oneness with no bearing on the physical reality of life on earth. Paul, like many Christians of the early centuries, believed he was living in the final days on earth and Jesus would bodily return to reign on earth in their lifetime. With this reality in mind some twentieth century Christians insisted Paul was speaking about the status of believers after Christ’s return rather than recommending a mode of life for earthly churches.¹⁶

After the *Brown* decision clergy across the South released official and unofficial statements expressing their support. Various articles and resolutions published by religious councils and conferences spoke confidently of southern people’s speedy and joyful adherence to the *Brown v Board* prescriptions.¹⁷ Commenting on the *Brown* decision, writers of *Christian Century* praised the decision and the Justices’ choice not to set a timetable. They believed “the silent public opinion of the south [had] already marked off segregation as a doomed and dying social arrangement.”¹⁸ However optimistic these joint statements may have been, individuals in the church often expressed skepticism or rejection of integration. Some white men in the church believed God ordained races to live in separate spheres while others felt people just needed time to unlearn segregationist habits.¹⁹ As one elder at First Presbyterian of Columbus explained

¹⁶ Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*.”

¹⁷ Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet*, 18-19.

¹⁸ Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet*, 19.

¹⁹ Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*,” 121-2; Minutes of Session, March 24, 1958, First Presbyterian Church Records, Columbus State University Archives, Columbus, GA [hereafter cited as FPR].

it, “A whole lifetime of rearing had gone into certain fields of feeling, and [southerners] can’t get over that in one year.”²⁰

Leading advocates for civil rights, especially those who felt they were fulfilling a divine calling, looked to ministers as leaders. Those who conceived civil rights as a spiritual issue expected their spiritual leaders to express a strong opinion on race relations; some expected strong integrationist statements while others hoped for segregationist ministers. However, many clergymen were hesitant to strongly state their thoughts on race relations. Some doubted their opinions would hold any sway over their congregations, much less the broader population of the South, and others felt ill-equipped to address an issue of social justice.²¹ Still, some ministers felt strongly about integration and the broader implications for civil rights and were compelled to act in line with their beliefs. While these outspoken ministers were in the minority among their colleagues, their stories illustrate the power of individual conviction.

One striking example of a southern minister who boldly advocated for civil rights is William Campbell. Campbell was born in 1924 in Liberty, Mississippi. At the age of sixteen he was ordained by a local Baptist minister then joined the US Army as a medic in 1942. After World War Two he entered Yale Divinity School and graduated with bachelor’s degree in 1952. His first pastoral appointment after seminary was at a Baptist church in Taylor, Louisiana. Campbell felt being a pastor of a small congregation in

²⁰ Minutes of the Session, March 24, 1958, FPR.

²¹ Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet*, 21; Samuel S. Hill, Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 111-112.

rural Louisiana did not allow him to communicate and apply what he had learned at seminary.²²

In August 1954 Campbell accepted a position as director of religious life at the University of Mississippi. He felt that at the University he could use his education to help the university transition to the new order of racial interaction.²³ One of his primary responsibilities was the annual Religious Emphasis Week, an event celebrated on many university campuses. In 1956 Campbell invited Alvin Kershaw to speak during Religious Emphasis Week; Kershaw was a member of NAACP and an outspoken proponent of integration. Soon after Campbell issued the invitation, information about Kershaw's affiliations and racial sentiments circulated through campus. Mississippi state representatives, University Chancellor J. D. Williams, and members of the American Legion contacted Campbell and ordered him to rescind the invitation. Student sympathy seemed to lie with Kershaw and Campbell until Kershaw published an article in the student newspaper explaining his support for the NAACP – this swayed most of the student body against Kershaw. After Kershaw's appearance on campus was cancelled, less than a week before he was due to arrive, other clergy scheduled to speak during Religious Emphasis Week withdrew. Soon after the conflict surrounding his choice for Religious Emphasis Week, Campbell drew hostile looks from students and faculty. Campbell had a black reporter from the North stay as an overnight guest of his family and then received negative student attention for playing Ping-Pong with a black minister. The negative attention became so oppressive that Campbell resigned in 1956 and moved to

²² William D. Campbell, *Forty Acres and a Goat* (Atlanta, GA: Peachtree Publishers, Ltd., 1986), 4.

²³ Campbell, *Forty Acres and a Goat*, 4-5.

Nashville to become the director of the Southern Project of the NCC's Department of Racial and Cultural Relations.²⁴ So he moved on, "Having been thwarted in his maneuver to deliver the university's young from the shackles of racial bigotry and their elders from constitutional ignorance."²⁵

In his work with the NCC, Campbell travelled throughout the South encouraging clergy to work with municipal leaders to achieve peaceful school desegregation. This work took him to each state of the South where he stood on the battle lines of many desegregation confrontations. In some instances Campbell found local clergy eager to support the desegregation efforts, other who were adamantly opposed to the effort, and still others hesitant to express a strong opinion.

When Campbell visited Clinton, Tennessee he met one minister who left him underwhelmed; Campbell did not feel he was likely to gain strong support for the civil rights movement and left the community. Campbell's efforts may have paid dividends after his departure or he may simply have been mistaken in his evaluation of Reverend Paul Turner. Whatever the reason, Turner soon developed into a strong and outspoken advocate of integration. Turner, pastor of First Baptist Church, Clinton, Tennessee, took his stand by escorting six newly-enrolled black students to a white high school. After seeing the students safely into the building, Turner was attacked by a group of nine white adults who only ceased their beating as police officers dragged them away. Five days after this incident, Turner stood before his congregation calling for equal rights and an end to prejudice. He further promised his congregation he would continue to escort black

²⁴ Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet*, 22-24.

²⁵ Campbell, *Forty Acres and a Goat*, 4-5.

children to school if it was necessary; this sermon was broadcast for Edward R. Murrow's *See It Now* television program.²⁶

School desegregation was one element of the civil rights movement that shaped every community. It is not surprising, therefore, that many supporters of civil rights spoke out in favor of school integration. Reverend Dunbar Ogden Jr., first expressed his support for civil rights by escorting black students to school. Ogden was a Presbyterian minister in Little Rock, Arkansas and president of the Greater Little Rock Interracial Ministerial Alliance. He called for members of the alliance to walk with the students and, when none volunteered, determined to go with the students himself. Initially his congregation felt he acted only out of obligation, not true sympathy, and did not oppose his actions. However, as it became clear that Ogden honestly supported integration, church members became more hostile towards him. His congregation, a fairly affluent one, responded by withholding funds. They contended that their opposition was not due to his racial philosophy but because "he was neglecting his parish duties."²⁷ Church member often criticized outspoken pastors not for their statements on race relations but for an imbalance in their ministry. Members of Ogden's church felt he was inattentive for congregational needs, focusing too much on social circumstances. The financial stress and criticism proved so powerful that Ogden moved to Charleston, West Virginia and became assistant minister of a Presbyterian church there.²⁸

²⁶ Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet*, 25-26; Campbell, *Forty Acres and a Goat*, 49; Sadly, the pressure and hostility of his congregation and community led Turner to commit suicide a few years later.

²⁷ Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet*, 35

²⁸ Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet*, 35

Many aspects of Ogden's conflict with his congregation are reminiscent of the conflict Reverend McNeill experienced in Columbus.²⁹ McNeill's opponents rarely expressed criticism of his racial views but questioned his fulfillment of his priestly duties to the congregation. Also, McNeill served as pastor of an affluent congregation whose members attempted to use their financial contributions as leverage to sway the pastor's actions. The members of First Presbyterian were not only affluent, but had strong ties to the community.

First Presbyterian Church

Beginning in the church's early years, the members of First Presbyterian developed a strong historical consciousness. James Gilbert published the first history of the church in 1930 in honor of the church's centennial anniversary. Fifty years later Everett Peirce Moye wrote *The Third Fifty Years, 1930-1980, of the First Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Georgia* – a book with a self-explanatory title. Sixteen years later Myron Hamilton published *And Character Produces Hope: Authorized Memoirs of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia for the Period 1946-1995*. Hamilton provides a narrative recount of each year listed in the book's title; he draws his information primarily from minutes of church meetings and his own recollections.³⁰

Each of these authors was a member of First Presbyterian Church and, therefore, particularly interested in the events of the church. The work of each author contributes to

²⁹ Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet*, 33, 35.

³⁰ Gilbert, *A History of the First Presbyterian Church*; Everett Pierce Moye, *The Third Fifty Years, 1930-1980, of the First Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Georgia*, (Columbus: First Presbyterian Church, 1985); Myron Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope: Authorized Memoirs of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia for the Period 1946-1995* (Columbus, GA: Quill Publications, 1996).

a fuller understanding of First Presbyterian's development and its significance in its members' lives.

The First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia has been a part of the city for the city's entire life. The Presbyterian Church's historical record begins in April 1833 with the earliest-known book of minutes while popular memory holds the church's origin in 1830, making the church two years younger than the city of Columbus. Early in 1830 a group of fourteen men and women met in a small room on Columbus's main street to organize a Presbyterian Church; they then obtained permission to hold meetings in the court house until they could complete their own building. The following year the congregation dedicated their first building on October 1831 at 2nd Ave and 10th Street and a second building at the same location the next year. A third building in the same location was built in 1844 and dedicated January 25, 1845.³¹ In January 1836 the church roll listed 95 names and by 1843 the membership had grown to 144 members, four of which were African Americans.³²

Church records indicate three African American members admitted to First Presbyterian on May 24 and June 6, 1858. In his history of the church, Gilbert follows this report with the observation that most churches had a balcony where African Americans sat. He explains that the members realized their building would no longer accommodate their membership, necessitating a new building.³³ Gilbert does not make a clear link between these three facts – new African American members, balcony

³¹ Gilbert, *A History of the First Presbyterian Church*, 2, 12-14, 16, 24; Telfair, *A History of Columbus*, 42.

³² "Story of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbus," *The Columbus Magazine* 2, no. 3, July 31, 1941, 13.

³³ Gilbert, *A History of the First Presbyterian Church*, 28-29.

accommodations, and plans for a new building. The location of the observation about the balcony implies that perhaps First Presbyterian did not have such a balcony and required one now that they had additional African American members.

The church was incorporated in 1859 as the First Presbyterian Church of the City of Columbus; the congregation chose to take this action in anticipation of purchasing land on which to build a new building. The lot they purchased at 1st Avenue and 11th Street is the site of the present church building; the first building at this site was dedicated February 2, 1862.³⁴ Church records do not indicate the reason for these new church buildings though the projects were likely tied to the young church's steadily growing membership. The number of building campaigns also indicates an affluent membership. The congregation of First Presbyterian raised funds for four building projects within the church's first thirty years, one of them in the difficult years of the Civil War. The members were dedicated to the expansion of the church and able to leverage significant capital. A fourth building project came in 1892 after the church was gutted by fire in November 1891.³⁵

Five years later the Board of Deacons voted to stop renting pews in the church. This was a common practice, allowing church members to reserve certain seats in the sanctuary in exchange for a donation to the church. Since higher-income members were able to rent pews first they claimed the most desirable seats in the front and center of the church. Members unable to afford a rented pew sat in unclaimed pews near the back of

³⁴ Gilbert, *A History of the First Presbyterian Church*, 30, 33.

³⁵ Gilbert, *A History of the First Presbyterian Church*, 3, 36-41; Based on the builder's estimate, church members anticipated occupying the newly re-built church beginning November 27, 1892, the Sunday closest to the date of the destroying fire. In anticipation of this event, the church leadership commissioned a marble plaque inscribed with the date and placed near the pulpit. Unfortunately, the building was not complete and the first service in the restored building was actually February 5, 1893, though the plaque with the November date remained in the church.

the room. Pew rentals served to illustrate the social status of each church member. The Deacons cited the financial difficulty of many church members when they announced their decision. The financial difficulty was likely tied to Columbus's condition after the Civil War. For several years after the war church members were unable to make any significant contributions to mission work. By 1903 members' financial condition improved significantly and the church initiated its first major foreign mission effort by donating \$300 for a Mission Station in Brazil. Three years later the congregation established a fund – The D.F. Willcox Memorial Mission Fund – to support a missionary in Brazil.³⁶

For the next several years, First Presbyterian enjoyed steady growth in membership with no major crises or conflicts. Yearly reports to the Presbytery indicated the Session, a ruling body of the church's elders, was pleased with attendance to Sunday morning worship services though somewhat disappointed with attendance at evening services. The elders noted the effectiveness of training children in the memorization of scripture and the catechism and felt reasonably sure that individual members observed private worship and meditation during the week. During the early decades of the twentieth century, First Presbyterian seemed primarily concerned with local events. Though the Session records contain no explicit mention of the First World War, the elders discuss how to administer the Service Center maintained for the recreation of soldiers at the nearby military camp.³⁷

³⁶ Gilbert, *A History of the First Presbyterian Church*, 43-45.

³⁷ Minutes of Session, April 5, 1909, April 13, 1910, April 12, 1911, April 15, 1912, April 21, 1913, April 15, 1914, April 7, 1915, FPR.

Financially, First Presbyterian thrived and in early 1929 Dr. Boyd's pastoral report indicated high expectations for the church's work over the next year. He hoped to fulfill the church's building debt (\$22,000) by the end of the year; begin planning for building a new church sponsored by First Presbyterian; initiate a practical mission center – including building a facility – and hire a woman to administer this work; and encourage members to include First Presbyterian in their wills as a recipient of endowments.³⁸ The Great Depression forced the Session to modify the pastor's ambitions goals, but the church gained members and maintained financial stability during the 1930s.

Just as World War II ended, the pastor of First Presbyterian accepted a position at another church and left Columbus. The Pastor Nomination Committee quickly found a new pastor and called Dr. John E. Richards who preached his first sermon on March 17, 1946.³⁹ Dr. Richards was a former Army Chaplain and his military training came to bear in his pastorate; he emphasized order and responsibility. During his time at First Presbyterian, Dr. Richards established a tradition of presenting a detailed "state of the church" document to the Session at the end of each fiscal year.⁴⁰ His first report of this type was on April 25, 1947, and included an update on world affairs and the status of ministries within the church. He highlighted some ministries that were functioning efficiently and growing, such as the Young People's groups, Intermediate and Primary Departments of Sunday School, and the Women's Auxiliary. Other ministries needed increased participation and attendance, such as Sunday School and individual involvement in community efforts. He concluded with a strong statement regarding the

³⁸ Minutes of Session, February 12, 1929, FPR.

³⁹ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 4.

⁴⁰ The church's fiscal year began on April 1 and ended on March 31.

church leadership: “The most vital, conspicuous weakness of our church is to be found in failure of the Elders and Deacons to meet the responsibilities of their offices.” He specifically sites the leaders’ lack of attendance at church events such as Sunday evening worship, Sunday School, and prayer meetings. Richard chastised the church elders, “...unless we are good examples to the flock of God, we are failures...unless the Pastor and the Session can find some remedy for the failure of our officers, our church can expect a dismal future.”⁴¹ His words seem especially powerful in light of church’s experience in the following decade.

Under Dr. Richards’s direction, church membership and giving rose steadily. In 1950 the membership contributed over \$100,000 for benevolent giving, as it had for the past three years. The church reached its historic high membership mark in 1951 with 1,329 members. The congregation approved of Dr. Richards and he was pleased with the church’s growth. His annual statements about church progress indicate growth in ministries throughout the church. In keeping with his strong opinions about church order, he felt a pastor should remain at a church for no more than six years. This interval, he felt, was ideal to allow a minister to effectively teach and challenge a congregation without growing complacent. Therefore, as he approached his sixth year as pastor Dr. Richards announced his intent to resign his post effective June 1, 1952.⁴²

The committee charged to find a new pastor quickly found thirty-seven-year old Robert Blakely McNeill, then pastoring a church in Jacksonville, Alabama, who accepted the call to First Presbyterian in the Fall 1952. He preached his first sermon at First Presbyterian on November 23, 1952 though he did not preach again for the remainder of

⁴¹ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 13-16.

⁴² Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 44, 53, 61.

the year. Dr. Norman G. Dunning, an English evangelist, preached at First Presbyterian on November 30 and December 7. The remainder of the year's calendar was filled with special Christmas music and programs.⁴³ These early weeks allowed McNeill to meet the members of his new congregation and gave the congregation time to form an opinion of their new pastor. McNeill was a "winsome fellow" whose "calm and unimpassioned style of preaching" required a period of adjustment for several church members.⁴⁴ After acquainting themselves with McNeill's academic preaching style, the members of First Presbyterian came to appreciate McNeill. Members recognized McNeill's efforts to comfort the sick and bereaved and came to enjoy his well-developed, intellectually-driven sermons. As he assumed the responsibilities of his new post, McNeill's life experiences and education served him well.

Robert Blakely McNeill's Education and Early Career

In his book *God Wills Us Free: The Ordeal of a Southern Minister* McNeill tells the story of his life, giving prominence to his experiences at First Presbyterian. Throughout his narrative, McNeill reflects on his perceptions of the South, religion, the church, pastors, and social justice. His writing gives valuable insight into his development and gradual awakening to racial inequalities.

Robert Blakely McNeill spent his childhood in Birmingham, Alabama; his father moved to the city in 1898.⁴⁵ McNeill developed his earliest worldview based on the views of his parents. His mother's pride in her Scottish heritage and reverence for

⁴³ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 65, 72.

⁴⁴ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 72, 82, 103.

⁴⁵ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 11-12.

aristocracy, of which she believed herself a part, gave McNeill a love of his southern heritage. His father's ties to his farming family gave McNeill a deep respect for the value and honor of physical labor and laborers. Throughout the twentieth century, McNeill's maternal relatives stood in opposition to racial equality, though they took that stand "like gentlemen" while the "piney woods forebears" of McNeill's father "emerged as the men of good will" in race relations.⁴⁶ As the two veins of heritage converged in young McNeill's life, he attempted to reconcile them. Influences from outside his home further shaped his developing sense of the world and his place in society.

The McNeill family home stood in an all-white neighborhood in Birmingham; the neighborhood now known as Dynamite Hill. The adjacent African American neighborhood, East Thomas, and the McNeill's neighborhood were held separate by zoning laws. McNeill and his contemporaries lived on the border of two worlds and soon developed a "schizoid temperament." At times the white boys felt compelled to defend their territory and threw rocks at any black boy passing too closely. Other times the boys' desire to play and need for an additional player overruled their racial pride and they invited the passing boy to play. Even when throwing rocks McNeill and his compatriots were careful not to make contact for their dual conscience "allowed [them] to degrade but not to injure."⁴⁷ Law and convention taught the boys not only segregation, but a complex system of rules that governed that separation.

McNeill says he first developed a "social conscience" when his mother sent him to find prospective new cooks for his family's kitchen. In his canvass of African American neighborhoods he saw the conditions of their homes and realized their

⁴⁶ McNeil, *God Wills Us Free*, 14-20.

⁴⁷ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 21-22.

precarious safety as he experienced their hesitancy to open the door to a white boy. In the counter-intuitive world of segregated lives, a white child could pose a substantial danger for an African American family. Still, segregation was so much a part of his life that, even as he experienced it, he did not fully recognize it. On a shopping trip with his mother, a young McNeill chose a seat on the bus on the wrong side of the racial line. He remembered sitting next to an African American man – who he reflected was likely a Methodist Bishop based on his clothing – and wondering at the man’s broad smile. As the man passed him over the back of a seat to the arms of his mother McNeill noted the indulgent smile the two adults shared. This was McNeill’s first memory of experiencing segregation.⁴⁸

Overall, the McNeill family’s interactions with African Americans were “gracious.” Maintaining a gracious relationship with African Americans was “Southern tradition” and allowed the gracious ones to identify themselves as “true Southerners.” With this distinction they distanced themselves from anyone who actively persecuted African Americans and they were thus able to abhor the violent actions of some southern segregationists without actually disagreeing with their segregationist sentiments.⁴⁹ McNeill credits his older brother, Walter, with instilling in him the understanding that racial discrimination was a problem that must be addressed by all white people. As Walter explained to McNeill “the guilt was corporate” and even whites who did not actively create or endorse segregation were responsible for its outcomes.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 23-24.

⁴⁹ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 24.

⁵⁰ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 26, 29.

McNeill attended elementary and high school in Birmingham, never fully enjoying or excelling in school activities. When he entered Birmingham-Southern College in 1932 he was a young man of “130 pounds, all bone and gristle,” who dreamed of being an athletic star. He achieved some success in this goal, earning places on the football and basketball teams, but no real stardom. Socially and academically he assumed leadership roles and received honors but ultimately felt he had “picked up a few silver and bronze metals but never the gold.”⁵¹

As he progressed through college, McNeill developed a desire to attend law school. He enjoyed academic study and he wanted a way to positively impact the world, especially people who needed an advocate. He felt a law practice would challenge him intellectually and give him a concrete way to help others. McNeill never considered vocational ministry until a speaker at his college’s Spiritual Emphasis Week planted the idea. Henry Hitt Crane was such a dynamic speaker that the usually-empty chapel was packed for each of his nightly sermons. After one particularly challenging evening, McNeill approached Crane, who asked the college student if he had considered ministry. “Rob, let me tell you,” said Crane, “it’s a thousand-mile drop from the lowest pulpit to the highest pew – if you are called.”⁵² The preacher’s direct manner and powerful bearing roused an emotional response in McNeill. Still, the “call” Crane referenced seemed distant from McNeill. Vocational ministry held no appeal for him; while McNeill respected the pastors and church leaders he knew, he felt distant from them, sensing they were somehow “irrelevant.” Without having the words to put to the sensation, McNeill felt there was something too utopian about the goals of the church.

⁵¹ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 30-38.

⁵² McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 39.

He was looking for its application to the social realities of a hurting world, though he did not realize this search until later in his life.⁵³

As planned, McNeill entered law school at the University of Alabama in 1936. He did not follow a straight course through school, but detoured several times as he attempted to identify his passion. One year of working full-time as a short-order cook while taking a full schedule of classes left him exhausted so he took a job near his home in Birmingham, hoping to save money and re-enter school after a year. Working at Linde Air Products McNeill earned enough money to meet his monthly expenses, contribute to his family, and put money in savings – he earned \$65 per month. During this time at home, McNeill’s father passed away and he decided to stay near his family rather than return to school. Eventually he realized his job at Linde Air Products could not fulfill his desire to positively impact society. He considered the options before him and seemed to hear Henry Crane’s words to him in the chapel at Birmingham-Southern College – “if you are called.”⁵⁴ As he considered vocational ministry, McNeill balked at becoming an example, set apart as if he was of higher quality. He knew he did not want the traditional trappings of a pastor. He wanted “God to be such a reality in all of life outside the church that people would be as conscious of Him and as desirous of Him as of the sun on a dimly gray day.”⁵⁵ After a season of “wrestling with God” over his decision to attend seminary, McNeill chose to begin his ministerial training at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.⁵⁶

⁵³ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 45.

⁵⁴ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 39, 45-50.

⁵⁵ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 50.

⁵⁶ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 51-53.

Seminary broadened the world of McNeill's experiences but initially reinforced the opinions he brought from home. As he progressed in his program, McNeill encountered circumstances that challenged his assumptions about himself and the world. In his second year at seminary, McNeill attended his first integrated activity which was a conference of several seminaries. This integrated event was not intended as an activist statement, it was a practical decision – the seminaries shared a denominational affiliation and none could sponsor a conference alone. In reflection, McNeill considered this conference as one of the initial incidents that challenged his ideas about racial relationships.

After completing his seminary degree in 1942, McNeill took a position as minister to Presbyterian students at the University of Kentucky. He worked part-time and attended classes to earn his Master's degree. While at the University of Kentucky he met and married Jeanne Lancaster in August 1944.⁵⁷ After completing his Master's Degree, McNeill took a job in 1945 as the minister to Presbyterian students at the University of Texas in Austin. A group of the students with whom he worked decided to invite the student choir from an African American church to attend a Sunday night meeting. Since the students under McNeill's direction typically shared a meal on Sunday nights, they chose to include an invitation for the African American students to join them for dinner with integrated seating. When the church's officers learned of the invitation they were highly displeased and blamed McNeill for the decision. They believed McNeill was encouraging, or forcing, the students toward civil rights activism. The McNeill family soon left Austin due to difficulty in finding reliable housing though rising tensions in the

⁵⁷ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 61-64.

church made the move welcome.⁵⁸ McNeill's first job after his graduate degrees confirmed his ideas about the distance between daily life and church.

⁵⁸ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 64-65.

Chapter 2

“Warn and Bear Witness”

Southern Protestant doctrine heavily influenced McNeill and he also developed the conviction that Christians had a responsibility to ensure social justice. He further felt it was his duty as a pastor to remind his congregation of this responsibility. At First Presbyterian, McNeill’s yearning to challenge his congregation’s complacency conflicted with church members’ ideas of a pastor’s duties. The conflicts within First Presbyterian Church in the late-1950s illustrate how southern Protestant doctrine informed church members’ responses to the civil rights movement. McNeill’s struggle to balance his priestly and prophetic duties indicates the high expectations pastors faced from internal and external sources.

Early in McNeill’s pastorate at First Presbyterian, the leadership faced a series of crises. Each instance highlighted a sensitive element of church politics. The debate over the Plan of Union centered on the issues of Presbyterian polity and freedom of conscience. The elders hired the Wells Organization to ease the burden of fundraising but actually created more budgetary concerns. Church planting projects, especially in Carver Heights, tested ideas of benevolence and race relations. Each of these events also strained relationships among church leaders. These instances prove the church is an institution plagued by rivalry and discord as much as any other endeavor.

Southern Protestants and the Twentieth Century Church

When, as an adolescent, McNeill felt himself drawn to the words he heard in Sunday morning services, the religion he was accepting was “as much folk religion as the Christian faith.” He accepted the doctrine he heard espoused by his pastor and teachers, one that “promised comfort, prosperity, and perpetuity” and a “God-blessed and enthused sectional patriotism.”⁵⁹ He reflected that the things about church most appealing to him were not necessarily the fundamentals of Christianity but interpretations of those doctrines. McNeill correctly assessed the unique character of the Protestantism his family practiced; it is a “peculiar variety of evangelical Protestantism” that reigns in the South.⁶⁰

Southern Protestantism grew from a unique blending of four traditions: Anglican (Episcopal), Calvinist, Baptist, and Methodist. Each of these traditions contributed their essence to the blending of southern religious life. Calvinist Presbyterians asserted a Reformation-fueled dependence on God’s saving grace and confidence in divine direction of history; Calvinists also emphasized the importance of service. Dissatisfied church members founded the Baptist church as a reaction to specific conflicts and to emphasize worshipers’ direct access to God with no need for a mediator. Methodism began as an effort to “overcome the sterility” of Anglican worship. Anglicanism seems out of place among these reactionary denominations but the church’s “concepts of church polity, worship, and morality” heavily influenced southern religion even when the social-status of the church members distanced them from most southerners.⁶¹ Southern Protestant

⁵⁹ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 43.

⁶⁰ Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, xii.

⁶¹ Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, 74.

churches of all denominations to some extent share in this mixed-heritage. Each tradition active in the southern states has a flavor unique from similar traditions in other regions and each shares certain elements.

McNeill remembered the Protestantism of his youth as largely fundamentalist, emphasizing biblical literalism and the doctrines of “grace, justification, sanctification, and predestination.”⁶² Emphasis on salvation through the power of God’s saving grace corresponded to admonitions to avoid “works-righteousness” – the attempt to earn salvation based on merit of individual actions. Salvation of the individual is central to southern religious thought and practice. In many cases, this central truth transforms to an exclusive one; biblical interpretation and church programming are shaped to exclusively provide for individual salvation, often without the recognition that biblical mandates include other actions. In magnifying individual salvation some southern Protestants pushed the Bible’s calls for social responsibility to the fringes.⁶³ This doctrine tended to widen the gap between Sunday-morning righteousness and Monday-morning action. Often, church-goers saw little connection between their spiritual life and their social responsibility. The idea of “individual salvation” took the connotation of personal and private information with no bearing on public responsibilities. McNeill remembered being “harangued” over his personal sin with “seldom a hint” regarding problems with “the social order” or that there is sometimes “collective” responsibility for social circumstances.⁶⁴ This distance between Christian doctrine and the action of Christians frustrated McNeill.

⁶² McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 41.

⁶³ Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, 77-81, 89-91.

⁶⁴ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 41.

McNeill became a pastor weighted with his own convictions about the responsibilities associated with that call. His were not the only expectations he would confront, however. He was further constrained by the contemporary expectations for a pastor; standards for the “new” preacher required him to be approachable and entertaining. The pastor was the man to please the “modern ecclesiastical corporation” more concerned with the “prosperity of the church” than the “quality of its preaching.” This emphasis on a pastor’s salesmanship left congregations existing on a “starvation diet” rather than being filled with life-giving teaching from a dedicated and well-versed preacher.⁶⁵ McNeill’s wrote most of his thoughts on pastoral duties soon after his hurtful experience at First Presbyterian; he may have written from this place of hurt. However, McNeill’s ministerial contemporaries similarly expressed the difficulties pastors face in their relationships with their congregations.

As he described the obstacles his father, Vernon Tyson, met in attempting to pastor a church whose leadership was “staid and conservative,” Timothy Tyson summed up the difficult balance pastors must strike, “Every minister worthy of the name has to walk the line between prophetic vision and spiritual sustenance, between telling people the comforting things they want to hear and challenging them with the difficult things they need to hear.”⁶⁶ Each of Tyson’s extremes has its own dangers – a pastor who offers all challenge would have few followers and one who offers only comfort would have nowhere to lead. Vernon Tyson repeatedly found himself at odds with his congregations on issues of race. Though he was aware of the ideal balance for a pastor, he found it difficult to achieve.

⁶⁵ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 107.

⁶⁶ Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, 16.

The very title of Samuel Hill's 1967 book, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, indicates his concern for the state of the South's congregations. Hill did not write about a specific congregation but about southern Protestant churches at large, lamenting, "Individualistic evangelism and morality are all it gets excited about, notwithstanding the headline-making events which occur under its nose almost every day."⁶⁷ Writing in the late-1960s, the headlines Hill mentioned were likely related to the civil rights movement. Hill saw that southern Protestants had become so focused on individual salvation that they were ineffective in relating biblical principles to the world. He felt selective reading and shaded interpretation of the Bible had skewed modern understanding of Christian doctrine so that southern Protestants had little understanding of a Christian social ethic. Even pastors felt themselves ill-equipped to confront public moral crises.⁶⁸

In expressing frustration over how to interact with their congregation, these pastors often express the difficulty in balancing the prophetic and priestly roles of a pastor. "Pastor" is a comprehensive term that carries the connotations of the various roles Protestants expect a leader of a church to fulfill.⁶⁹ A pastor will, at various times, be called on to preach, minister, evangelize, shepherd, and counsel. Specifically, the office of pastor unites the two Hebraic traditions of the prophet - who spoke God's words to the people - and the priest - who spoke "for the people to God."⁷⁰ Thomas Oden, a theologian and seminary professor, warns pastors that there will be times when they will find it necessary to "identify accurately the particular deficit or injustice or lack of

⁶⁷ Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, 115.

⁶⁸ Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, 111-112.

⁶⁹ Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1983), 50.

⁷⁰ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 86.

awareness in the flock at a given time.” In these moments, it is the pastor’s duty to preach prophetically to his congregation, relate biblical truth to the current situation, and “have the courage to stand up as the conscience of the community, as an unintimidated critic of a corrupted society.”⁷¹ As Oden explains it, prophetic preaching is not a special kind of skill notable in some pastors and absent in others. All pastors have the responsibility to act as a prophet for their congregations.

Early in his career, McNeill identified the prophetic role as a vital part of pastoral ministry. His book *Prophet, Speak Now!* explained the prophetic role of a pastor and considers this role in relation to a pastor’s other duties and relationships. McNeill believed the contemporary church was in crisis caused by “the suppression of the prophetic voice and the resort to the priestly ministries as not only the exclusive but the total function of the church.”⁷²

While “prophet” may conjure an image of an Old Testament sage foretelling God’s wrath and judgment, the prophetic duty of a pastor is to illuminate connections between the Bible and the congregation’s lives. However, prophecy is “*a spirit of power and not of prediction.*”⁷³ When modern pastors and theologians speak of the prophetic duty of ministers, they do not intend that ministers should explain events that will occur in the future. Rather, prophetic words bring the principles of the Bible to bear on current circumstances. In effect, the prophet says, “This is what God said about what is

⁷¹ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 138-9.

⁷² McNeill, *Prophet, Speak Now!*, 68.

⁷³ Robert McNeill, *Prophet, Speak Now!* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961), 18 [emphasis in original].

happening around us.” This “open[ing] up through Scripture the lively address of God” often comes in the form of prophetic preaching.⁷⁴

Protestants recognize prophecy as a pastoral duty. However, pastors who preach prophetically often encounter resistance from their congregations. Often, pastors who spoke in favor of civil rights met criticism from their congregation regarding their priestly duties. Prophetic preaching is not always a warning against sin but often it is. Human nature rebels at correction, defensively taking offense at most signs of disapproval. Southern pastors who alerted their congregations to the injustice of racial segregation put themselves in opposition to a system which many members believed intrinsic to their lifestyle.

When McNeill assumed the pastorate at First Presbyterian he had yet to formally articulate his theories on the role of prophetic preaching. However, he had strong convictions regarding social justice and the church’s social responsibility. The church leaders also had strong ideas about social relationships and strong expectations for their pastor. Presbyterian polity divides denominational leadership among a series of bodies, each responsible for a designation region and accountable to another body. The Session is the highest level of leadership within individual churches. Elders serve on the Session for a term set by the congregation; attend regular meetings; and offer spiritual and administrative guidance to the congregation. The pastor attends Session meetings but does not have a vote in any of the Session’s decisions. The relationship between the Session elders and the pastor can be cooperative or combative. Session members are always members of the congregation and usually long-standing members. Conversely,

⁷⁴ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 86, 138.

pastors are rarely drawn from a church's membership and, upon accepting the call to a specific pulpit, register as members of the regional Presbytery rather than the individual church they will pastor.

McNeill's Early Ministry at First Presbyterian

In the mid-twentieth century, First Presbyterian had more church officers than at any other period in its history. There were twenty-eight elders in the Session and thirty-two on the Board of Deacons. These men came from some of the oldest and most powerful families in Columbus. Many of them were professionals with successful practices in the community – lawyers, doctors, bankers, business-owners.⁷⁵ Among the elders were men whose families had lived in Columbus for a century, many who were members of First Presbyterian for the same period. These elders led the church and the community.

The large and active body of elders' committee meetings created boxes of minutes and resolutions. Myron Hamilton's account of the church, *And Character Produces Hope*, also provides useful summaries and insight into church activities through the second half of the twentieth century. Even Hamilton's title indicates his evaluation of the church's development. Hamilton takes his title from the fifth chapter of the biblical Book of Romans; this section of the chapter explains the effects of suffering to enhance character, build perseverance, and ultimately instill hope.⁷⁶

First Presbyterian Church and its development in the 1950s and 1960s has received practically no scholarly attention so Hamilton's account is typical of the sources

⁷⁵ All elders at First Presbyterian in this period were men. First Presbyterian elected its first female elder in 1973.

⁷⁶ Romans 5:3-5.

available – a personal account from an individual deeply connected to the life of First Presbyterian. From 1958-1964 Hamilton served as Clerk for the Session and the upheaval in the church's life gave him more responsibility than a Clerk usually holds; when the Session was disbanded and its ruling authority given to a commission whose members lived throughout the state, Hamilton served as liaison.

The late-1950s were difficult years for the congregation and leadership of First Presbyterian of Columbus, Georgia. While acknowledging the hostilities surrounding racial relations in the 1950s Hamilton did not believe race relations were the center of the church's strife. He asserted, "Against this background [of the civil rights movement], but not because of it, of course, 1957 became the year our Church almost split."⁷⁷ Despite Hamilton's disclaimer, at first consideration the problems confronting First Presbyterian in the last years of the 1950s seem to be wholly a result of conflict over the civil rights movement.

McNeill certainly believed his racial views to be the central feature of the controversy, recalling one of the earliest conversations he had with a church member. The man approached McNeill with the friendly reminder that one of his ministerial predecessors had "gone astray" on racial issues with the implicit warning that McNeill should not similarly stray. As he took this new ministerial post, McNeill expressed his particular awareness of the expectations that awaited him. Though First Presbyterian Church of Columbus was not McNeill's first pastoral post, the church was significantly larger with deeper historical roots than his previous congregations.

⁷⁷ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 118.

With the consciousness of his congregation's expectations and his own convictions, McNeill entered ministry at First Presbyterian Church of Columbus in 1952. A church of such prominence in an era of such turmoil could hardly have been an easy position and almost immediately tension strained McNeill's relationship with some of the church's members.

Plan of Union

The first major conflict within the church leadership under McNeill's direction occurred in 1954 over the "union issue." While the communities across the nation attempted to process the implications of the Supreme Courts *Brown v Board* decision, First Presbyterian faced its own momentous decision. In the mid-twentieth century, Presbyterian churches in America were split in to a number of denominations based on various shades of doctrinal difference. The two major divisions were the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), or Southern Presbyterian Church, and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A, or Northern Presbyterian Church. This North-South division dated to 1861 when the church divided in the early days of the Civil War.⁷⁸ These two churches clearly share a heritage, but beginning in 1861 functioned as distinct entities. Their shared origin meant they employed the same form of government and terminology but they did not function as parts of the same church.

The Presbyterian Church is governed by member-elected representative bodies as described in the denominational constitution, especially the *Book of Order*. At the pinnacle of the hierarchy is the General Assembly. This body is composed of

⁷⁸ Other denomination also split along North-South lines during this period. The Methodist Church split in 1844 and reunited in 1939, though they established a separate-but-related denomination for African American congregations.

representatives selected from ministers and elders of congregations throughout the denomination.⁷⁹ The General Assembly is the guiding force of the Presbyterian Church, responsible for setting goals and creating administrative procedures to fulfill those goals. This body is also responsible to “warn [and] bear witness against error in doctrine or immorality in practice in or outside the church.”⁸⁰ The next division in the hierarchy is subordinate to the General Assembly as are all subsequent levels of authority. A synod is a geographically-based division providing functions similar to the General Assembly but with direct authority over the churches in a defined region. Each synod is then divided again into a number of presbyteries. In the 1950s, First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, and the other Presbyterian churches in the city, belonged to the Southwest Georgia Presbytery.

Within individual Presbyterian congregations, the Session is the elected body responsible for the “government and guidance” of the church.⁸¹ There are other elected leaders, such as the board of Deacons (Diaconate), but they are under the authority of the Session.⁸² Chairmen of major committees are also members of the Session so that the Session serves as a key point in the life of the church – the central nervous system from which other systems radiate. Any person in the church who serves a leadership role is a minister, responsible to fulfill his/her specific duties and set an example of Christian living. These ministry positions must be elected by the church membership and adhere to codes of conduct based on biblical mandates and outlined in the *Book of Order*. Though

⁷⁹ “Membership,” G13.0102, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II: Book of Order, 2009-2011* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2009). [hereafter cited as *Book of Order*]

⁸⁰ “Responsibilities,” G13.0103, *Book of Order*.

⁸¹ “A Particular Presbyterian Church,” G 4.0104, *Book of Order*.

⁸² “Government,” G7.0103; “Supervised by Session,” G6.0404, *Book of Order*.

the ministry positions are based on models from the New Testament, ministers within each church get their authority by virtue of their election by the congregation.⁸³ No person can hold a leadership position in the church without the “approval of God’s people” expressed through voting.⁸⁴ Still, leaders are not called merely to act in line with their congregational constituency but to prayerfully consider every situation and act as their conscience dictates.

Session leadership is republican rather than strictly democratic; the Session acts in the interest of the people using their own judgment rather than responding directly to the wishes of the congregation in each decision. This gives members great power over their leaders at the beginning of their ministry – no one can be elected if a sufficient portion of the membership is against it.⁸⁵ Through several rounds of nominations and elections, dedicated opponents could block a person’s entry in to leadership. After a representative is elected, however, members do not exercise direct control over their leaders’ decisions. Elected ministers make many decisions about the church and its governance without direct reference to the congregation.

The form of Presbyterian governance dictates that decisions such as uniting northern and southern churches filtered through the respective General Assemblies. Presbyterian Church leaders first mentioned the idea of reuniting the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches in October 1951, near the 90th anniversary of the denominational split.⁸⁶ Again in 1954 the possibility of reuniting the two long-sundered parts of the church came before the PCUS (Southern) General Assembly. The General

⁸³ “The Church and Its Officers,” *Book of Order*.

⁸⁴ “Gifts and Requirements,” G-6.0106, *Book of Order*.

⁸⁵ “Election by the People,” G-6.0107, *Book of Order*.

⁸⁶ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 54.

Assembly proposed a Plan of Union and distributed the Plan to each synod then Presbytery, in turn. In order to approve the Plan, and unite the two churches, seventy-five percent of the Presbyteries within the PCUS had to vote in favor of the Plan of Union.⁸⁷ Individual congregations regularly sent representatives taken from their body of elected elders to scheduled Presbytery meetings. The Southwest Georgia Presbytery initially presented the possibility of union at its meeting on July 6, 1954. At this time the Presbytery received the recommended Plan of Union from the General Assembly and appointed a special committee to study this plan and present its findings in January 1955.⁸⁸

Elders attending Presbytery meetings served as representatives of their home churches, but not delegates as the Presbyterian system allowed representatives to vote with their conscience rather than acting strictly as voices for their congregations. Congregations, therefore, had no direct say in the General Assembly's decision to reunite with the Northern Presbyterian Church. Though individual members did not have a direct voice in the union matter, members were still concerned and hostile over the possibility of union. In some ways, the controversy that stirred in First Presbyterian over the Union vote was the "beginning of the problems which, at times, were dominant for the next five years."⁸⁹

The conflict surrounding the possible reunion with the Northern Presbyterian Church was not a case of McNeill standing opposed to the prevailing church opinion. The Session and the larger congregation were deeply divided over the plan for union.

⁸⁷ Minutes of Session, February 14, 1955, FPR.

⁸⁸ Minutes of Session, September 20, 1954, FPR.

⁸⁹ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 86.

Some were upset by the idea of Union while others opposed the decision-making process, resenting that they had no means of directly influencing the vote. Since the Presbyterian system of governance is representative, and those representatives have a right to express their conscience, as guided by God, individual members have only an indirect vote in the actions of the General Assembly. Elder Paul McKenney, Sr., asserted this right when he was elected by the Session as a representative to the Presbytery meeting at which the vote on the Plan of Union would be held. He admitted his reluctance to go but accepted the nomination on the condition that he would not be asked to reveal his vote, either before or after the Presbytery meeting.⁹⁰

Despite the clear provisions for this kind of freedom in the Presbyterian system, many members of First Presbyterian were alarmed that their representative for the crucial vote may not act in accordance with the church's popular opinion. In October 1954 a group of First Presbyterian members who strongly opposed Union created a petition and held it ready to circulate if the Session did not agree to allow a congregational vote. Further, this group implied they were ready to withhold financial support from the church if they were not allowed to vote.⁹¹ The Session adopted a resolution allowing a congregational vote but also acknowledging the freedom of representatives to vote according to their conscience. The congregational vote, as outlined in the resolution, provided that members could vote for or against the Plan of Union without any "discussion that might become acrimonious and impair the feeling of good will and Christian fellowship."⁹² The congregation voted at a meeting held October 31 – 111

⁹⁰ Minutes of Session, December 13, 1954, FPR.

⁹¹ W. S. Persons to Session, Letter to Session, October 9, 1954 included in Minutes of Session, Oct. 11, 1954, FPR.

⁹² Resolution, Minutes of Session, October 11, 1954, FPR.

members voted in favor of Union and 191 against.⁹³ Church members clearly understood, and were reminded, that the congregational vote held no authority in the Presbytery's decision. Perhaps the members felt their opinion expressed through a vote would sway the opinion of the elder attending the official Presbytery vote.

In McNeill's reflection on this episode, he seems to remember himself as the primary object of church members' frustration. He also emphasized his own refusal to bend to the congregation's popular will. The Session minutes do not show the congregation hostile to McNeill; it seems, rather, that the elders of the Session were in conflict with a relatively-small group of members. The Session minutes do not reflect the full scope of the conversations and conflict surrounding Union but McNeill's recollection may also be selective. Whatever the exact distribution of responsibility in the Union vote, these incidents indicated some strong tendencies within the First Presbyterian Church leadership.

For one, McNeill felt highly responsible for the actions of the church leadership; even when the responsibility for a decision could be spread among church leaders, McNeill viewed his role as primary. Also, the congregation demonstrated the principle that conflicts within large groups rarely break the group into discreet camps. Session elders and church members supported and opposed various aspects of the Plan of Union for several reasons. Elders in the Session did not share the same opinion on union; those who opposed union did so for a number of reasons. Further, in the union issue the members of First Presbyterian were informed and vocal participants in a decision that belonged solely to the church's leadership. Members were quick to form a group that

⁹³ Minutes of Congregational Meeting, October 31, 1954, FPR.

could communicate their mutual wishes to the governing body and to threaten reprisal if their wishes were not fulfilled. While leaders may desire an informed and interested group supporting them, few would be pleased to find that group using material support as leverage.

Also, the union debate was obliquely connected to McNeill's stance on race relations. Clearly the 1861 split of the Presbyterian Church into northern and southern churches was directly tied to issues of race and slavery. Expressing his desire to reunite with the northern church amounted to McNeill saying southern church members needed to re-examine their traditional beliefs regarding race and religion. While indirectly telling his church's elders they should consider their attitudes towards race he directly asserted his pastoral prerogative. This voting incident proved that McNeill was not willing to submit to the wills of church leaders on issues where he felt his conscience directed him otherwise.

The Wells Organization

The failed Plan of Union vote was not the end of tensions at First Presbyterian. In 1955 McNeill recommended hiring the Wells Organization, a professional fundraising consultation firm, to help increase giving within the congregation. From the beginning this was a contentious decision. The elders voted to hire the organization but there was a vocal minority in opposition.⁹⁴ The Wells Organization's officers had to work closely with church leaders, many of whom resented the presence of Wells officers. The organization used some aggressive strategies to contact and secure donation pledges from church members; these donations could only be secured using equally aggressive follow-

⁹⁴ Minutes of Session, May 11, May 18, 1955, FPR.

up procedures. However, since many of the church leaders disapproved of the firm's strategies they did not conduct the necessary follow-up. This meant the church's giving rose sharply under the firm's guidance and then declined over the following four years.⁹⁵ Some church leaders pointed to the decline in giving as evidence of disharmony in the church.

After the Wells campaign the church leadership settled into a mode of operation that, if not peaceful, was not openly hostile. However, elders and members argued over budgetary allocations. Twice in January of 1956 the elders took a budget proposal before the congregation, seeking funds for two separate projects. Each time the elders were forced to call a recess during congregational meetings because "spirited discussion" prevented approval of budgetary expenses.⁹⁶

The Session was responsible for creating the church's annual budget.⁹⁷ At First Presbyterian, the Diaconate assembled the annual budget, with consideration for the Session's requests, then presented the proposed budget to the Session. After gaining the Session's approval, the budget had to pass a congregational vote. Any major expenses followed a similar procedure for approval. In January 1956, the elders first sought congregational approval for the church's annual budget. The second time they presented the congregation with a proposal to televise the church's Sunday morning services. Since the contract with the television station represented a significant expenditure not listed in the budget, it required express congregational approval.⁹⁸ Eventually, the congregation

⁹⁵ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 120-121, 138; Minutes of Session, May 11 and 18, 1955, FPR; Budget report, included in Minutes of Session, October 21, 1957, FPR.

⁹⁶ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 106-7.

⁹⁷ "Responsibilities," G10.0102, *Book of Order*.

⁹⁸ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 106-107.

approved the plan to televise Sunday morning services. Contention regarding television contract recurred regularly; some members felt it was a significant ministry to the community while others felt it was an unnecessary expense.

Church Extension

In the 1950s First Presbyterian continued to pursue one area of its mission that was a significant part of its historical activities – church planting. The church leaders felt responsible to establish places of worship for people unable to attend First Presbyterian due to geographic – or social – barriers. In most cases, the churches First Presbyterian established were intended either for economically disadvantaged citizens or for African Americans. These benevolent projects allowed church members to contribute to the lives of less-fortunate without interacting with them. Especially in the case of African American chapels, the Session – who oversaw the projects – had a patronizing attitude toward the new congregation. The process for creating a new church gave First Presbyterian total control over the young church, sometimes for years.

Initially First Presbyterian would establish chapels under the administration of First Presbyterian and financially dependent on that congregation. Eventually, if the chapel established a consistent attendance, it would file for official church status with the denomination. Even after officially becoming a distinct congregation, young churches often remained dependent on financial or administrative support from First Presbyterian.

The first of these chapels was Holt Chapel built in 1908 using money given by Mr. Charles S. Holt on his death. The First Presbyterian equipped this building to house a Sunday School and mission chapel previously holding services in the area. In the early-

1920s Holt Chapel officially registered as a church and changed its name to East Highlands Presbyterian Church. The church dissolved in late-1928 and many of its members joined First Presbyterian. After this dissolution, First Presbyterian again operated the chapel as a mission and regular services continued under the auspices of First Presbyterian.⁹⁹ Though Holt Chapel was originally for white people living in the East Highlands district, by the 1950s it was a church for African Americans. First Presbyterian continued to support the church as a mission effort. In 1952, Holt Chapel had 103 people in attendance and the First Presbyterian Session felt the membership was ready file for church status. By May of that year, the new Holt Church was “well on its feet.”¹⁰⁰

The same year, another of First Presbyterian’s mission churches gained official church status. Edgewood Chapel officially separated from First Presbyterian to be recognized as a church on March 30, 1952. It continued to be an important part of the ministry of First Presbyterian, however, as Edgewood still relied heavily on the First church for financial support. One year after gaining church status, Edgewood Presbyterian had sixty four members and a new pastor, W. B. Clemmons. Clemmons was a nearly-constant figure in the local mission efforts of First Presbyterian Church. In 1915 when he was still studying for his ordination, Clemmons oversaw First Presbyterian’s mission churches including Holt Chapel and a church in Phenix City – the Alabama city adjacent to Columbus across the Chattahoochee River – beginning

⁹⁹ Gilbert, *A History of the First Presbyterian Church*, 51-5; Minutes of Session, December 2, 1928, January 20, 1929, FPR.

¹⁰⁰ Minutes of Session, April 21, May 19, 1952, FPR.

September 1915.¹⁰¹ He also played a significant role in the project that seemed to dominate First Presbyterian's church extension efforts in the 1950s.

At its February 16, 1953 meeting the Session approved \$5000 for establishing a "negro Presbyterian Church" in Columbus; this project eventually became Carver Heights Baptist Church. This action was "originated and endorsed" by First Presbyterian's Women of the Church.¹⁰² In April 1954, the Session authorized an offer on a lot in the Carver Heights district of Columbus for the purpose of establishing a Presbyterian Church in the area. However, before fully committing to the project of planting a church in this African American neighborhood, the Session decided to request assistance from the Presbytery's Division of Negro Work within the Board of Church Extension. They requested that body to conduct a survey in the Carver Heights neighborhood and determine the level of interest in attending a Presbyterian Church. The results of this survey would presumably reveal how large First Presbyterian could expect the new church to be at its birth. However, the Division of Negro Work advised against this survey.¹⁰³ James J. Alexander, a member of the Division of Negro Work, believed the survey would likely not indicate "the firm basis for which you are asking." He believes "most of the Negroes throughout the South do not know anything about the Presbyterian Church." The Presbyterian Church offered a program with which people of other denominations were not familiar and will be unlikely to be interested in, based on their contact with preaching-based church ministries of other denominations. Alexander

¹⁰¹ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 62; Minutes of Session, April 21, 1952, FPR; Minutes of Session, September 26, 1915, FPR.

¹⁰² Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 73.

¹⁰³ Minutes of Session, April 19, 1954, FPR; Letter to Session, November 18, 1954, in Minutes of Session, December 13, 1954, FPR.

reminded the Session of Dr. Batchelor's previous survey of Columbus, indicating the need for a Presbyterian Church in Carver Heights. Though the Division of Negro Work felt a survey of interest would not indicate great willingness to join a new church, the previous survey of need indicated that people would join the church after seeing the programs it offered. Therefore, Alexander recommended the Session proceed with plans for the mission church in Carver Heights. The Session had the successful example of Holt Presbyterian to encourage their efforts.

The Session moved toward with the creation of a chapel in Carver Heights and by purchasing lots at the junction of Illges Road and Eighth Street and searching for a pastor to lead the project. Since the church was intended as a mission for African Americans, the Session interviewed a number of African American pastoral candidates. The elders were unable to find an African American pastor who fit the Presbyterian qualifications for ordination and, therefore, considered an alternative for filling the pulpit. In June 1955 the Session first considered the possibility of calling Reverend W.B. Clemmons, former pastor of the Edgewood Presbyterian Church, to organize and lead the Carver Heights Chapel. Reverend Clemmons had a long history with the First Presbyterian Church having served as a pastor in mission churches for forty years. Clemmons and his wife, Marian, were "earthy and lovable." Their personalities and genuine love for people made them seem an ideal fit for Carver Heights, though there were still obstacles to a white couple taking leadership in an African American community.¹⁰⁴

Throughout the summer of 1955, the elders considered this possibility, concluding with extended discussion at their August meeting. The Session would only authorize

¹⁰⁴ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 126.

Clemmons and his wife to serve at Carver Heights if he was explicitly called as “MISSION pastor.”¹⁰⁵ Since the couple was white, the Session wanted to clearly identify their role in and relationship to the African American Carver Heights congregation. The Clemmons accepted the call in September.¹⁰⁶

Having now secured a pastor for the mission church, the Session turned to address the problem of a meeting place until the church building could be completed. In November McNeill unofficially questioned a Muscogee County School Board member about using a classroom in the Carver Heights School for Sunday meetings. The board member responded that the School Board would likely be reluctant to agree to this due to the “presently existing conditions, both locally and statewide [*sic*] on the matter of segregation.”¹⁰⁷ Supporters and opponents of integration became increasingly vocal and the presence of the Clemmons in the Carver Heights roused some negative attention. More than once, members of the Ku Klux Klan paraded past the church. One day near Christmas Reverend Clemmons received a Christmas card with charred edges bearing a warning for him and his wife to leave the church. McNeill took the card to Columbus’s City Manager to ask for his support. The City Manager apologized and promised to speak to the leader of the KKK, asking him to stay away from the Carver Heights congregation.¹⁰⁸ His response is a disconcerting confirmation that he, as a city official, had full knowledge of the identities and activities of klansmen. In Columbus, as well as other cities across the South, the KKK did not operate as an anonymous body. Either by active support or passive approval, citizens allowed klansmen to monitor race relations.

¹⁰⁵ Minutes of Session, August 8, 1955, FPR [emphasis in original].

¹⁰⁶ Minutes of Session, September 4, 1955, FPR.

¹⁰⁷ Minutes of Session, November 14, 1955, FPR.

¹⁰⁸ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 127-128.

The klan's hostile interest only strengthened the Clemmons's resolve to serve the Carver Heights community.

In January 1956 First Presbyterian hired an architect to construct Carver Heights Chapel; First Presbyterian also maintained the responsibility of choosing a permanent, African American pastor for the church.¹⁰⁹ The Carver Heights church continued to grow and in the summer of 1963 had approximately 200 students in Sunday school and 100 members.¹¹⁰ Carver Heights remained under the direction of First Presbyterian's Session until 1970. At a congregational meeting on March 15, the church unanimously voted to transfer the title of ownership of Carver Heights Presbyterian Church and its land to the leadership of the Carver Heights church.¹¹¹

This relationship between First Presbyterian and Carver Heights Chapel exemplifies the attitude of the "gentle segregationists" that characterized so many of the members of First Presbyterian, according to McNeill.¹¹² The attitude toward the members of the Carver Heights congregation was benevolent but still emphasized separateness. While the Session of First Presbyterian eventually deeded the church building and property to the members of the Carver Heights church it took nearly twenty years. Until that transfer, the Session of First Presbyterian made most major decisions for the Carver Heights congregation making that congregation a major focus of First Presbyterian's mission efforts for several decades.

¹⁰⁹ Minutes of Session, January 21, April 22, May 20, 1957, FPR.

¹¹⁰ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 176.

¹¹¹ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 243.

¹¹² McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 143.

1955-1956

The next year and a half were relatively peaceful in terms of McNeill's relationship with his congregation. After a period of adjustment to his academic preaching style, First Presbyterian members found McNeill's sermons exceptionally compelling. In 1955 the church opened a contract with a local radio station to broadcast Sunday services and in 1956 First Presbyterian's opened a contract to televise Sunday morning services.¹¹³ There were moments of contention, however; the budget meeting called to approve the expense of televising Sunday services was recessed due to "spirited discussion" which prevented the meeting concluding in a timely manner. February 1956 brought a small wave to the shore of First Presbyterian when several Deacons questioned quotations McNeill provided for a local newspaper article. Elders from the Session soothed the Deacons by scheduling a meeting with McNeill to address the questionable quotations, and affirmed McNeill's leadership by taking a vote of confidence.¹¹⁴ November 1956 marked McNeill's fourth year as pastor of First Presbyterian and an announcement in one Sunday's bulletin commended his leadership in the physical, financial, and spiritual expansion of the church as "indications of a congregation that is growing to full Christian maturity."¹¹⁵ The repeated conflicts between McNeill and the elders seem to contradict this optimistic assessment. Perhaps were superficially cordial or the elders presented unperturbed fronts. It is clear that a pattern of suspicion and dissension began in 1954 and carried through the next years of McNeill's tenure. In early-1957 latent hostilities rose to prominence, where the stayed for over two years.

¹¹³ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 95, 107.

¹¹⁴ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 107.

¹¹⁵ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 109.

Chapter 3

Conflict and Confrontation

In 1957 McNeill began his fifth year as pastor of First Presbyterian of Columbus. During these years tension regarding race relations stretched taut across the nation. Primus King and his voting rights suit served as a bellwether of the civil rights movement for Columbus. In the mid-1950s racial issues made headlines with increasing frequency. The Supreme Court's *Brown* decision in 1954 and the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 captured the attention and elicited strong reactions in every community. Sixty miles southeast of Columbus, segregationists boycotted and attacked Koinonia Farm, an interracial communal farm, through the summer of 1956 and 1957.¹¹⁶ Everywhere individuals chose their stance on race relations – some chose integration, others chose segregation, still others chose indifference. Members of First Presbyterian also confronted national and local campaigns for civil rights and chose their responses.

As pastor of a prominent and influence church, McNeill's choice regarding race relations received more scrutiny than the opinions of most. His already tense relationship with the Session elders strained further as they men confronted differences of opinion. The elders felt McNeill was a representative of the congregation and as such his actions should conform to the Session's wishes. McNeill advocated freedom of the pulpit and

¹¹⁶ K'Meyer. *Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South*, 85-87; Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, 106-109; Dora.Byron, "Koinonia Revisited." *The Nation* 1957, 226-28; "A Farm in Georgia," *The Nation*, September 22, 1956, 237-238.

felt he could act as his conscience directed. In the last years of the 1950s the leadership of First Presbyterian clashed as their conflicting views on race and church polity converged in the course of a few months.

McNeill's 1957 *Look* article

When Chester Morrison initially contacted McNeill in April 1957 he hoped McNeill would write an article for *Look* magazine that addressed a specific issue. That issue was the alleged connection between white, southern clergy and the Ku Klux Klan. Later, McNeill and Morrison agreed that a simple rebuttal of cooperation with the KKK was not sufficient; it would be better for McNeill to offer insight into the beliefs and approaches of southern clergy regarding the growing civil rights movement.¹¹⁷ McNeill's initial reactions to the editor's request were confused if not directly contradictory. He feared his own congregation's reaction to the article, predicating they would see the action as "brash, impudent, even disloyal."¹¹⁸ Though he knew "the consequences could be so disastrous," McNeill appreciated the opportunity to express his ideological stance and looked forward to the pleasure of writing a published article. He and his wife ultimately reasoned that the article had the potential to do some good as an encouragement to clergymen in the south who shared McNeill's ideas on the current racial conflicts. Local church people might also appreciate the article as an alternative to hearing McNeill's racial stance in a sermon and a reassurance that he was "less extreme

¹¹⁷ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 138.

¹¹⁸ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 139.

than they thought”¹¹⁹ This last hope seems an unlikely one considering McNeill’s near-simultaneous predictions of disastrous outcomes.

McNeill planned to announce his forthcoming publication before it was released nationally but word of his article reached church officers even before his announcement. Those officers were angry with McNeill for publishing an “anti-Southern” article and wanted to call an “extraordinary” meeting of the church’s elders the following evening. In place of this emergency meeting, McNeill agreed to read the article before a joint meeting of the Session and Diaconate. He stipulated that this reading must be “without comment or discussion” from the church officers since the pastor’s private actions were not under the authority of either body.¹²⁰

At the next meeting of the Session, McNeill formally announced his upcoming *Look* article and the meeting adjourned; the Deacons joined the Session to hear McNeill read his article. The text McNeill read to the church elders was the exact text that appeared in *Look* a month later.

McNeill’s article, “A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South,” appeared in the May 28, 1957 issue of *Look* magazine. First Presbyterian Church members who opposed McNeill’s article, sometimes complained the pastor served as a representative of his church. They feared readers would assume the church members shared McNeill’s opinions.¹²¹ The first page of the article features a picture of McNeill standing in front of the First Presbyterian Church building. Some read the inclusion of this picture as an indication that McNeill was speaking on behalf of the congregation – a portrait of the

¹¹⁹ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 140.

¹²⁰ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 141-142.

¹²¹ Minutes of Session, March 24, 1958, FPR; Emmett B. Cartledge to Session, June 17, 1958, included in Minutes of Session, June 17, 1958, FPR.

church that symbolically indicated the endorsement of the church's members. If this picture does signify McNeill as a representative of First Presbyterian Church's opinions, the article's first page further links McNeill and the church to the civil rights struggle.

Though McNeill and Morrison agreed that the article should focus more generally on the role of clergy in race relations, they also agreed that McNeill should begin with a discussion of the Klan.¹²² In light of McNeill's commitment to racial justice and equality one might expect to find a condemnation of the Klan but McNeill's words are more of a dismissal. Disconcertingly, McNeill expresses an admiration for the Klan of his youth and a condescending pity for the Klansmen of the 1950s.

Upon attending a Klan initiation soon before his article's publication, McNeill concluded the Klansmen were "no more awesome than a high-school graduating class."¹²³ McNeill does not express support or sympathy for the Klan or its tactics – he proudly notes the ineffectiveness of the KKK threats against the Carver Heights church project. McNeill implies that the Klan is a slightly ridiculous effort to revive a method of racial control that was effective in previous generations but not suited to mid-century race relations. For him, the Klan poses no serious threat but elicits "pity."¹²⁴ This pity is not based on a sense of sympathy with Klansmen's opinions but McNeill's recognition that Klansmen "spread fear to be rid of fear" – they act violently because they have no other means of bolstering their own self-esteem.¹²⁵ McNeill's dismissal of the Klan's potency seems especially unfortunate when held in tension with later civil rights historiography. No scholar would expect McNeill to foresee the future but, in light of the Klan's

¹²² McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 138.

¹²³ McNeill, "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," *Look*, May 28, 1957, 56.

¹²⁴ McNeill, "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," 59.

¹²⁵ McNeill, "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," 59.

activities through the 1960s, McNeill's observations seem somewhat naïve. McNeill's strategy for combatting the perception that southern clergy cooperate with Klansmen is to dismiss the power of the Klan and offer a clerical solution for the South.

The issue of race so heavily permeates society that it cannot be calmly considered; even the vocabulary of civil rights is tainted with hostile meanings, McNeill observes. He acknowledges the word "integration" has acquired a set of connotations making it impossible for most Southerners to embrace the concept. At this period, McNeill says, integration "implies the unnatural displacement of persons, abnormal gatherings of uncongenial people, awkward relationships, despoiling one group's culture by the encroachment of the other, sexual irregularities and intermarriage." He again speaks on behalf of southern ministers when he introduces the concept of "creative contact" as "our mode of operation" as an alternative to integration with its heavy emotional baggage.¹²⁶ Creative contact is an extra-legal scheme that will presumably be more attractive because it is voluntary. The contact McNeill proposes involves sharing "the *responsibilities* as well as the privileges of living together."¹²⁷ He suggests interracial councils and boards, such as when he served on the board of directors for the Negro Y.M.C.A.

The model of creative contact works because the goal of the civil rights movement, according to McNeill, is "not *rights* but *respect*."¹²⁸ He describes "two sentiments in the nature of the Negroes" that challenge the idea of total integration. His tone in this passage is authoritative and borders on condescension as he assures the reader

¹²⁶ McNeill, "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," 58.

¹²⁷ McNeill, "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," 59 [emphasis in original].

¹²⁸ McNeill, "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," 59 [emphasis in original].

that no one of either race wants a fully racially integrated life – “They neither demand nor desire to be invited to the white ladies’ lawn parties, but they do feel that they have a right to a dignified use of those public properties and privileges which all citizens hold in common – a use without any symbols of humiliation.”¹²⁹ Though he makes almost no mention of social relationships and absolutely no mention of romantic interaction, some readers interpreted “creative contact” as a call for interracial marriage. These readers felt the “creative contact” McNeill advocated was a code for sexual contact. Here McNeill’s critics echo the logic that opposed the *Brown* decision fearing it as a step towards miscegenation.¹³⁰

Within his own congregation, the most common indictment of McNeill’s article was its misrepresentation of First Presbyterian’s members’ opinions on race relations. McNeill’s article does carry of tone of representation, however he seems to be speaking on behalf of southern ministers, or at least ministers who share a “moderate” stance on race, rather than on behalf of his local congregation. Through repeated use of the pronoun “we” and with rhetorical questions such as, “Why do we stay with the church when the strongest resistance seems to come from our own people?” he positions himself as a representative of southern ministers.¹³¹ McNeill briefly describes his own journey toward the realization of racial equality. He tells of several specific incidents in which he came in close contact with African Americans. The “irrefutable testimony” of personal observation coupled with the “relentless persuasion of the Bible” finally convinced McNeill of the inherent error of assuming inferiority of a group of people based on

¹²⁹ McNeill, “A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South,” 59.

¹³⁰ Myron Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 124; Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after *Brown*,” 121-2.

¹³¹ McNeill, “A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South,” 60.

race.¹³² McNeill takes a leap of logic and implies that his experience is common to all southern clergymen.

At his article's conclusion, McNeill again speaks for ministers of southern churches, responding to his own question of why ministers chose to stay with congregations who oppose their racial views. Ministers stay with their congregations, he says, because they realize "the church is the conscience of society."¹³³ The church is the only institution capable of facilitating "a redemptive society and happiness among the races."¹³⁴ Though McNeill does not discount judicial efforts towards equality, he believes they will always fall short if not supported by morality. In the struggle each race has adopted a branch of the legal system as his own, pitting state against Federal authority. "To the winner, there will be no sweetness of victory and no peace – only an uneasy armistice."¹³⁵

With "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," McNeill managed to leave nearly every reader dissatisfied. He indicates a fundamental error in southern thinking without endorsing any definite course of redress for racial injustice. He says "go slow" and angers both the group that wants to run and the group that does not want to move. He explains the differences between two "classes" of African Americans he identifies as the "servile class" and the "leader class."¹³⁶ While he condemns inferior treatment of any person based on race, McNeill does not argue for the equality of all men. In his other writings, McNeill offers more comprehensive explanations of his views on

¹³² McNeill, "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," 57.

¹³³ McNeill, "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," 60.

¹³⁴ McNeill, "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," 60.

¹³⁵ McNeill, "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," 59.

¹³⁶ McNeill, "A Georgia Minister Offers a Solution for the South," 59.

racial relations and it would be unjust to judge him based solely on this sample.

However, this article is significant as one of the earliest pieces McNeill published on the issue of civil rights. This article also served as a rallying point that unified church leaders opposed to his ministry and, ultimately, led to his dismissal from First Presbyterian Church.

As prescribed, no elder expressed any complaints when McNeill read his article at the joint meeting of the Session and Diaconate.¹³⁷ However, McNeill perceived the men's reactions ranging from indifferent to hostile. Some, he was sure, realized there was nothing radical in the content of the article; one elder later admitted he found "nothing offensive nor world shattering" in the article.¹³⁸ Since McNeill had forbade any official comment or discussion about the article, the Session minutes do not include any statements about the reception of the document. McNeill's perception was at least partially correct as the Session's next meeting proves.

Rising Conflict: 1957

At the May 20 Session meeting, the first meeting of the body since McNeill announced his publication in *Look*, two elders put forth a written resolution to be entered in the minutes as "Exhibit A." The resolution's wording is official, almost antiseptic. While it acknowledged "complaints registered with various members of the Session" and recommended the Session contacts the Presbytery's Commission on the Minister and His Work it did not specify the nature of the complaints. McNeill's *Look* article was not published until May 28, so if his article contributed to the elders' concerns, their

¹³⁷ Minutes of Session, April 22, 1957, FPR.

¹³⁸ Minutes of Session, March 24, 1958, FPR.

evaluation was based on McNeill's reading of the article at the April 22 meeting. After the resolution was voted in to the minutes, a "general and exhaustive discussion" ensued.¹³⁹ According to the Session Clerk's summary of the discussion, the Session, and possibly the congregation, was divided. Some elders expressed concern over First Presbyterian's respectability in the community, others pointed to strife among members. Some elders complained McNeill was shirking his pastoral duties by not visiting members regularly, others indicated the resolution was an inappropriate way to bring complaints against the minister.¹⁴⁰ Here is the beginning of the pattern of dissent that characterized the next two years in the life of First Presbyterian. Hamilton notes, only eight elders staunchly opposed to McNeill and sixteen strongly supported him.¹⁴¹ The perceptions of the congregations are more difficult to quantify as they generally did not express their opinions during official meetings with copious minutes, as elders in the Session did.¹⁴² Where church members did express their feelings about McNeill and his ministry, their reactions are equally as divided as the Session.

In March 1958, nearly a year after the elders first expressed their dissatisfaction with McNeil through the request to call on the Commission on the Minister and His Work, two members of the congregation wrote to express their opinions of McNeill's ministry. Augusta Meredith wrote to the Session to express her support and esteem for McNeill; she does not provide any explanation for her support. Walker R. Flournoy's letter, addressed to Dr. Frank King, chairman of the Commission on the Minister and His

¹³⁹ Minutes of Session, May 20, 1957, FPR.

¹⁴⁰ Minutes of Session, May 20, 1957, FPR.

¹⁴¹ There were twenty-eight elders in the Session; Hamilton's math indicates four elders expressed no opinion.

¹⁴² Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 118.

Work, and forwarded to the clerk of First Presbyterian's Session, catalogued five complaints against McNeill including his neglect of visiting sick members, his habit of reversing his decisions, and his publication in *Look*.¹⁴³ Flourney's letter characterizes the *Look* article as the final act proving that McNeill was not competently discharging his duties as pastor. These letters came to the Session at a moment when simmering tensions were reaching the boiling point. Elders were ready to express their direct opinions in the hope of restoring unity to their church. In the spring of 1957 that moment of openness was a year away - the Session could not foresee the number of months the church would be consumed and divided by the issue of McNeill's fitness as pastor.

In the early days of the controversy over McNeill's publication in *Look* the Session was privileged with more information about McNeill's activities than the church body at large – they previewed the *Look* article more than a month before its publication. Since the Session serves as the governing board of the local church, it is not surprising that the Session had more information about the minister and his activities than most church members. Undoubtedly there are aspects of church administration that only the Session and Deacons discussed. The Session fulfilled some responsibilities without the congregation as an active part of the decision. If there was ever a season when the Session kept the concerns about McNeill quiet, it surely ended by June 1957, if it lasted that long.

Look published McNeill's article on May 28, 1957 so the congregation was likely engaged in public and lively discussion about the article by this date. On June 12 Deacon Cartledge tendered his resignation as Deacon citing his disagreement with McNeill's

¹⁴³ Minutes of Session, March 24, 1958, FPR.

choice to publish in *Look*. He believed that McNeill's article did not reflect the thoughts and opinions of the church body, as a pastor's public statements should. Cartledge felt he could not keep himself in a place of leadership because he could not agree with McNeill's actions. At their June 17 meeting the Session read Cartledge's letter but chose to postpone acceptance of his resignation without indicating their reason for this action.¹⁴⁴ The board of Deacons is under the authority of the Session, as is the entire church, and the Session must approve any changes to the Diaconate. Therefore, though Cartledge expressed his desire to "dissolve [his] official relationship" with First Presbyterian, until the Session accepted his resignation he was still an active Deacon.¹⁴⁵ A month later Cartledge wrote again to withdraw his resignation because, since his original letter, he had spoken to several other elders and deacons who "likewise [were] not in accord with the acts of our Pastor."¹⁴⁶

Though the Session approved the resolution on May 20 calling for assistance from the Commission on the Minister and His Work, some elders regretted the decision. Through the next several months, the Session voted to expunge the resolution and all reference to it from the minutes and then reinstated their original decision, allowing the resolution to remain in the minutes.¹⁴⁷ The multiple changes to the minutes and the varied margins by which the votes passed attest to indecision among the elders. While some elders strongly advocated calling for outside help, others felt the tension could be

¹⁴⁴ Minutes of Session, June 14, 1957, FPR.

¹⁴⁵ "Supervised by Session," G 6.0404, "Dissolution of Relationship," G 6.0501, *Book of Order*; Minutes of Session, June 14, 1957, FPR.

¹⁴⁶ Minutes of Session, July 15, 1957, FPR.

¹⁴⁷ Minutes of Session, June 17, 1957, July 15, 1957, FPR.

soothed internally. At this point, the church leadership seemed to cleave into factions based on the degree of support each expressed for McNeill.

A group of eight elders acted on the recommendations in the resolution of May 20 and approached the Presbytery's Commission on the Minister and His Work, asking that body to intervene. The Commission's chairman agreed to put First Presbyterian on the agenda for the next meeting but encouraged the Session to work towards a solution before that time.¹⁴⁸ After the Commission determined to refer First Presbyterian's unrest to the Presbytery, a group of sixteen elders asked the Commission to delay this action. This group of sixteen elders convinced the Commission that the problems within First Presbyterian could be solved internally, without Presbytery intervention.¹⁴⁹

Through the remainder of the Summer and early Fall there were no overt eruptions of hostility at First Presbyterian. In September, the nation turned to Little Rock anxiously watching as President Eisenhower ordered Arkansas National Guard troops to enforce desegregation at Central High School. Still, elders at First Presbyterian ruminated on the conflicts of the Spring. At the October Session meeting, Elder Porter Pease, Chairman of the Deacons, and several of the Deacons met with the Session to present a report on the church's financial status. Pease submitted a written record of his statements to the Session so he would "not be misunderstood" and his statement could be easily entered in the Session's minutes. He summed up his financial report by observing that he was more alarmed by the church's income than its expenses. The previous year's

¹⁴⁸ Minutes of Session, July 15, 1957; "Report of the Judicial Commission, Appointed by Southwest Georgia Presbytery June 24, 1958, To Work with First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia," FPR; When the Commission on the Minister and His Work met in July 1957 to discuss the petition from First Presbyterian's elders, four elders were in attendance. McNeill was also present for a portion of the meeting and spoke with the Commission but without the elders present.

¹⁴⁹ "Report of the Judicial Commission, Appointed by Southwest Georgia Presbytery June 24, 1958, To Work with First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia," FPR.

“misunderstanding, unpleasantness, accusations and discord” hindered member giving to the Church. More importantly, Pease noted, the conflict within the church hindered the “spiritual progress” of the members. He challenged each of the elders to recognize his own part in the tense situation and renew his commitment “to study the peace, unity, edification and purity of the Church.”¹⁵⁰

The church faced another crisis on December 8 during a congregational meeting held to approve the new year’s budget. Before the congregation voted on the proposed budget, McNeill read a “State of the Church” address in which he told the congregation he was “through turning the other cheek” and reminded them of the New Testament story in which Jesus chased the moneychangers from the temple.¹⁵¹ These statements combined with his admonition of the congregation for their recent vote of new elders stirred resentments and wounded pride throughout the congregation.¹⁵² McNeill’s statement implied that the church’s leaders would misuse their offices for their own gain. His statement also pointedly cast himself as a victim of the church leadership’s hostilities. At the Session’s next meeting, McNeill’s statement was a topic of great concern. The elders read the minutes from the congregational meeting into the Session record and requested a copy of McNeill’s statement to include. McNeill refused to provide a written copy of his remarks, saying a pastor was not compelled to provide any of his statements in writing. He did invite any elder to view of copy of the statement in the pastor’s office and discuss it there.¹⁵³ Still his refusal to comply with the request for a written record

¹⁵⁰ Minutes of Session, October 21, 1957, FPR.

¹⁵¹ John 2:13-17.

¹⁵² Minutes of Session, January 20, 1958, FPR; Minutes of Session, March 24, 1958, FPR; “Report of the Judicial Commission, Appointed by Southwest Georgia Presbytery June 24, 1958, To Work with First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia,” FPR.

¹⁵³ Minutes of Session, January 20, 1958, FPR.

rankled some elders. This spark was enough to reignite the smoldering resentments from the previous summer. By the end of February, the Commission on the Minister and His Work responded to McNeill's request for their attention and determined to refer the problems at First Presbyterian to the Southwest Georgia Presbytery, requesting the formation of a Judicial Commission.¹⁵⁴

Intervention: 1958

McNeill chose to refer the dissension at First Presbyterian to the Commission on the Minister and His Work himself to “[take] the initiative away from [his] detractors.” Calling on the Commission to intervene took the power to resolve the conflict away from the members of First Presbyterian. The Commission “acts as a group pastor to ministers (and to churches) that find themselves needful of assistance.” The Commission also interviews pastors before they begin ministry at a Presbytery church; the ministers are members of the Presbytery rather than of the churches they serve.¹⁵⁵ The Commission on the Minister and His Work has authority to direct the actions of congregations within the Presbytery. McNeill assumed that the Commission would refer the case to Presbytery for the formation of a Judicial Commission. McNeill felt confident that a judicial hearing

¹⁵⁴ Minutes of Session, March 2, 1958, FPR; “Report of the Judicial Commission, Appointed by Southwest Georgia Presbytery June 24, 1958, To Work with First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia,” FPR. Initially, McNeill requested that the Commission on the Minister and His Work refer First Presbyterian's case to the Synod, because he had “intimate relationships” with several Commission members that may impair impartial assessment. The Commission determined it was their own responsibility to work with First Presbyterian and they would not refer the matter to Synod; McNeill then amended his request, asking the Commission to make an investigation.

¹⁵⁵ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 288.

would be a fair one, possibly even in his favor, since he knew several men from which the Commission would be assembled shared his opinions on race relations.¹⁵⁶

When he called on the Commission, McNeill seemed to circumvent the Session. The request for Presbytery help the previous summer originated with elders and intervention by a group of elders ended the process. When McNeill petitioned for help from the Commission on the Minister and His Work, he did so without consulting any elders. Just as the group of eight elders had done the previous year, McNeill did not alert the Session to his request until that request was received by the Commission chairman.

The Commission on the Minister and His Work considered the trouble at First Presbyterian and recommended the elders “earnestly seek to conduct themselves in greater Christlikeness in their relationships with one another, even to the extent of temporarily losing and being defeated” so the conflict could be resolved. Should the Session find itself incapable of resolving its differences, the Commission agreed to reconsider the situation.¹⁵⁷ The elders made some efforts toward resolving the tension within the church including meeting to air their differences of opinion.¹⁵⁸ However, by mid-May the elders acknowledged their inability to restore unity in the church. The Commission on the Minister and His Work met to again discuss First Presbyterian and decided the situation should be addressed to the Presbytery with the recommendation to form a Judicial Commission. Through the summer and early Fall the Judicial Commission conducted several meetings to discuss the history of the conflicts at First

¹⁵⁶ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 148; A Judicial Commission is not a standing committee but a body convened as necessary and drawn from eligible pastor within the Synod.

¹⁵⁷ “Recommendations of the Commission on the Minister and His Work of Southwest Georgia Presbytery Relative to the First Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Georgia,” included in Minutes of Session, March 2, 1958, FPR.

¹⁵⁸ Minutes of Session, March 24, 1958, FPR.

Presbyterian. Frank King, chairman of the Commission on the Minister and His Work, served as chairman for the Judicial Commission and corresponded with the Session to keep them apprised of the Commission's progress. In November the Commission concluded its investigations and prepared a report for the church. On November 30 King visited First Presbyterian to read the Judicial Commission's report at a congregational meeting.¹⁵⁹

The Judicial Commission's nine page report had four sections summarizing the history of the situation at First Presbyterian, analyzing the elements of the conflict, affirming principles important to the success of the church, and taking action to correct the distress at First Presbyterian. After interviewing a number of elders, the Commission determined the problems at First Presbyterian began in 1954 with the conflict over the proposed Plan of Union, built during the Wells Organization fundraising campaign, and culminated in the corporate response to McNeill's publication in *Look*. The actions ordered by the Judicial Commission were the first steps in a plan for reconciliation, but seem fairly drastic. The Commission dissolved the Session, having judged it incapable of reaching unity among itself, and transferred that body's responsibilities to the members of the Judicial Commission. They issued a call to McNeill for renewed attention to his priestly responsibilities as well as limiting his duties as pastor. The Board of Deacons remained intact but their forthcoming elections were cancelled. The Commission also

¹⁵⁹ Minutes of Session, May 19, 1958, FPR; Letters to Session, May 28, June 10, June 25, August 8, August 27, October 8, 1958; "Report of the Judicial Commission, Appointed by Southwest Georgia Presbytery June 24, 1958, To Work with First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia," FPR.

enjoined each church member to evaluate his/her commitment to the church and renew that commitment where it had lapsed.¹⁶⁰

So First Presbyterian ended 1958 with limited leadership. The Session, a Presbyterian Church's guiding body, was dissolved and its responsibilities passed to the members of the Judicial Commission. This step galled McNeill for it put the governance of the church in the hands of a body scattered throughout the state, led by a man two hundred miles away who was effectively "acting as bishop...when he had neither the experience nor the credentials of a bishop."¹⁶¹ The Board of Deacons, responsible for the logistical management of the church, continued to operate. Myron Hamilton, Clerk of the Session before its dissolution, along with two other elders served as liaison between the Judicial Commission and First Presbyterian.

Though the transactions were sometimes clumsy, First Presbyterian continued to function through the end of 1958 and into 1959. For instance, a member wishing to transfer membership provided that request either to Dr. Frank King, chairman of the Judicial Commission, or Myron Hamilton, Clerk of the disbanded Session. Whichever man received the request sent a notice of the request to the other. Since Hamilton was not allowed to grant dismissal letters, he waited to receive notification from Dr. King that the letter had been granted. Hamilton then modified the church roll to reflect the change. McNeill maintained some pastoral functions, such as performing weddings and baptisms. He also tried to assert some influence over the church leadership such as his proposal for elders to organize a program for visiting new and inactive members.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ "Report of the Judicial Commission, Appointed by Southwest Georgia Presbytery June 24, 1958, To Work with First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Georgia," FPR.

¹⁶¹ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 150.

¹⁶² Letter to Myron Hamilton, March 6, 1959, in Minutes of Session, FPR.

The Judicial Commission hoped their dissolution of the Session would serve as a kind of reset for the church community – allowing it to reach a new place of unity and understanding from which to proceed. They recommended the leadership of the church, including McNeill, use the time to reevaluate their commitment to the church. McNeill felt somewhat optimistic about repairing his relationship with the congregation until several incidents “intruded upon the community and the church.”¹⁶³ In the first seven months that First Presbyterian was under the rule of the Judicial Commission four incidents stirred hostility in the church and community. In each incident McNeill felt compelled by his conscience to follow a course he knew would be put him in conflict with members of First Presbyterian’s congregation. In the first incident, the League of Women Voters invited Ralph McGill, a popular columnist at the *Atlanta Constitution*, to speak about the state of schools relative to integration. McGill’s many articles in the Atlanta newspaper made clear his pro-integration stance; he raised further suspicions in the minds of many for his association with the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, notorious for its alleged Communist affiliation. The League of Women Voters struggled to reserve a location for their meeting and several venues cancelled reservations after learning of McGill’s scheduled appearance. McNeill advocated for the group and helped secure a meeting place.¹⁶⁴

A second event put McNeill in conflict with church leaders though he acted as an individual rather than an officer of the church. McNeill was a friend of Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Farm, an interracial communal farm in nearby Sumter County, Georgia. Beginning in 1957 the farm faced severe persecution; they had particular

¹⁶³ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 150.

¹⁶⁴ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 151-153.

difficulty in acquiring supplies for their farm. Jordan visited Columbus once in early-1958, in an unmarked truck and McNeill helped him acquire supplies. In early 1959 he sought McNeill's help in buying fertilizer for spring planting. After receiving several negative answers from local merchants, McNeill found a supplier in nearby Phenix City, Alabama willing to make the sale; later the man withdrew his offer. Both of Jordan's visits upset First Presbyterian leaders.¹⁶⁵

A third incident directly involved First Presbyterian's leadership. The church hostess and the minister of music, or choirmaster, had a history of disagreements. The middle-aged woman and young man often argued when their responsibilities required them to work together. One conflict escalated to the point that the choirmaster took the hostess's arm and attempted to escort her from the church; she filed charges with the police and had the choirmaster arrested for assault. The ensuing legal battle divided the congregation and community based on loyalty either to the choirmaster or hostess. McNeill supported the choirmaster, though agreeing his choice to physically direct the woman's departure was unfortunate. The case did come to trial but the man was quickly cleared of all charges.¹⁶⁶

In May 1959 Steve Leshner, a reporter for the *Columbus Ledger* contacted *Look* and offered to write an article about the reconciliation at First Presbyterian; he believed the church was recovering and wanted to write about how its peace was restored in the congregation. McNeill wrote an article in the weekly church bulletin giving notice of the forthcoming article. In his announcement to the church, McNeill clearly distanced himself from Leshner's article by stating he has not read the article and its contents cannot

¹⁶⁵ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 153-156; Minutes of Session, March 24, 1958, FPR.

¹⁶⁶ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 156-159.

be taken as the words of the pastor; he indicates the article will include a picture of the McNeill family but he insists this is not an endorsement of the article's content. McNeill asks the congregation to read the article with impartiality, allowing for the difference of opinions with love. "Above all, remember to do hurt to no one by act or word, neither to one who resists your opinion, nor your church, nor yourself. You are a Christian, the love of Christ constrains you!" McNeill concludes his announcement, which amounts to a disclaimer, with the judgment, "Some day the one thing that we shall marvel at is that it was ever necessary to have written the above lines."¹⁶⁷ Though Leshner's article was intended to be highly complimentary and optimistic, many of First Presbyterian's members were upset that their church would again be a topic in an article of the "South-killing magazine."¹⁶⁸

Through all these incidents and confrontations, the reality of the church's situation was a powerful force in the minds of many members. While the Judicial Commission took some action in November 1958, it clearly stated its judgment was not complete and further action would follow. These tense months kept First Presbyterian and McNeill on the scales as the Commission weighed and decided how to proceed. On June 1 M.S. Eddy wrote to express his support for McNeill. He noted the harmony at First Presbyterian and urged the Judicial Commission to take sufficient time to consider its next actions. If they chose to dismiss McNeill from First Presbyterian, he hoped the Commission would allow McNeill adequate time to find a new pulpit.¹⁶⁹ Eddy was

¹⁶⁷ McNeill, "From the Pastor's Study," *First Presbyterian Church News*, Vol. 12, No. 21, 22 May, 1959.

¹⁶⁸ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 159-160.

¹⁶⁹ Letter to Frank King, June 1, 1959, in Minutes of Session, FPR.

unaware as he mailed his letter that one day later, on June 2, the Judicial Commission met to decide the next step for First Presbyterian Church.

Action and Transition: 1959

On Wednesday, June 3, 1959, the chairman of the presbytery's Judicial Commission called McNeill at his office. He informed McNeill that the following Sunday (June 7) would be his last as pastor of First Presbyterian Church.¹⁷⁰ That Sunday morning McNeill preached a sermon titled "I Believe in the Church," having prepared and advertised the topic before the call from the Judicial Commission. Even then McNeill was struck by the strangeness of declaring his faith in the church when the church, or at least some of its members, were expressing their lack of belief in his ministry.¹⁷¹ This service, like all of First Presbyterian's morning services for the past three years, was televised. At the end of the sermon, the cameras' operators shut down their machines as McNeill introduced the chairman of the Judicial Committee then returned to his own seat on the pulpit.¹⁷² McNeill recalled that several of men who had been his opponent over the last two years now stood along the back wall of the sanctuary. Their presence was notable because most of them had not been attending services at First Presbyterian for months or even years. The chairman began by praising McNeill fulfillment of his "priestly duty" in giving the congregation a "timely dignity." He lauded McNeill for his "brilliant sermons" full of "incisive analysis of present-day situations." At this point the chairman seemed to be delivering a commendation but his

¹⁷⁰ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 1.

¹⁷¹ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 4.

¹⁷² McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 4.

next statements confused the matter. He proceeded to explain that it was necessary for a pastor to represent and express the opinions of his congregation rather than of himself alone. This was the reason the Judicial Committee “dissolved” the pastoral relationship between McNeill and First Presbyterian believing that “the interests of religion imperatively demand” the action.¹⁷³

Within days, reports of McNeill’s dismissal appeared in newspapers throughout the nation. The *New York Times* assured readers that the situation at First Presbyterian did not represent a victory for the “bigots” but “exposes the moral bankruptcy of those who fear free speech on this issue.”¹⁷⁴ Newspapers in Columbus carried detailed reports of the Judicial Commission’s statement and the congregation’s reaction, as they had followed the situation in the church closely for the previous year.¹⁷⁵ Even as McNeill’s relationship with First Presbyterian ended and national attention focused on the congregation, he attempted to make life seem normal for his three young children. The week after his Sunday dismissal, McNeill and his children were at a local bowling alley when McNeill suffered a major heart attack. While recovering at the hospital, he contracted double pneumonia and required four weeks of treatment before he was released to return home.¹⁷⁶ After some additional recovery time at home, McNeill accepted a call to Bream Memorial Presbyterian Church in Charleston, West Virginia.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ “Actions Taken by the Judicial Commission Appointed by the Presbytery of Southwest Georgia to Investigate and Act to Correct the Difficulties in the First Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Georgia” in Minutes of Session, FPR; McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 4-5.

¹⁷⁴ “Mr. McNeill’s Crime,” *New York Times*, June 9, 1959.

¹⁷⁵ “McNeill Faction Files Complaint on Ouster.” Columbus newspaper [?], July 1959. (vertical file); “Presbytery Seeks Unity At Church,” Columbus paper [?], December 2, 1958. (vertical file)

¹⁷⁶ McNeill, *God Wills Us Free*, 165-8.

¹⁷⁷ “Cleric Gets New Post,” *New York Times*, August, 9, 1959.

Conclusion

McNeill's experiences at First Presbyterian shaped the course of his life. In his published writings, McNeill reflected on his time as pastor and used the reflections to clarify his stance on race and pastoral duties. In 1965 he visited Columbus and reported that many people who had opposed him in 1959 were "extremely friendly and gracious." During his visit, McNeill said he would not hesitate to express strong opinions as he had when pastor at First Presbyterian but felt the climate had shifted throughout the nation so there was more room for controversial discussions. The six intervening years realized many of the ideas that disturbed his congregation in 1959.¹⁷⁸ McNeill continued as pastor at Bream until 1968 when he joined the faculty at Wilkesboro Community College in North Carolina where he worked until his death in 1975. In 2000 the Columbus *Ledger-Enquirer* honored McNeill by listing him in its pamphlet "100 People to Remember."¹⁷⁹

Just as McNeill's time at First Presbyterian impacted his life, the late-1950s shaped the development of First Presbyterian. Throughout the 1960s the Session record emphasized the unity among the elders and congregation. The elders make an extraordinary effort to be agreeable and follow every procedure outlined by the

¹⁷⁸ Tom Faulkner, "Rev. McNeill Visits Columbus First Time Since Leaving Church." *Columbus Enquirer*, June 19, 1965.

¹⁷⁹ "100 People to Remember: Robert McNeill," *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, January, 2000, 53-54.

denomination. It seems First Presbyterian's leadership was eager to avoid another Judicial Commission. Does this indicate a desire for harmony in the church or to avoid negative press? Whichever is the case, there is a clear change in the interactions among elders after 1959. In his memoirs of the church's life, Hamilton expresses that First Presbyterian was fortunate to experience its civil rights unrest relatively early. The 1960s were a period of increased racial tension, highlighted by the sit-in movement. First Presbyterian, however, was "prematurely subject to this discord" and "the air had cleared" by 1961 so that they were not impacted by the civil rights movements of the 1960s, according to Hamilton. It is doubtful – if not impossible – that every member of First Presbyterian solved his/her racial dilemma in 1959. It is more likely that they learned to avoid open controversy.

In 1982 First Presbyterian, Columbus, hosted the 122nd meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States – this was the final meeting of this denomination. At this meeting, the General Assembly debated and voted to approve a Plan of Reunion that would unite the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches. After this meeting, each Presbytery still had to send delegates for an official Presbytery vote in Atlanta, but the decision was truly settled at the Columbus meeting.¹⁸⁰ The two Presbyterian churches now formed the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) while dissenting southern Presbyterian Churches chose to form their own denomination, the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). First Presbyterian of Columbus joined the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A).¹⁸¹ Perhaps, in some ways, this confirms Hamilton's beliefs that the

¹⁸⁰ Hamilton, *And Character Produces Hope*, 390-391.

¹⁸¹ First Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Georgia "Who We Are," <http://www.columbusfpc.org/2010WhatWeBelieve.htm>; General Assembly Mission Council, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Presbyterian 101," <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/101/>.

church learned from the difficult years of the 1950s and used those lessons to build a stronger, more effective church.

While First Presbyterian and McNeill wrestled with civil rights in the mid-1950s – relatively early in the “classic” civil rights timeline – that does not transfer to the city at large. Columbus, like many southern cities, seemed to delay its response to civil rights activism. School integration was one of the most quantifiable responses to civil rights legislation. If Columbus’s response to school integration indicates its attitude towards civil rights at large, it attempted to maintain the status quo until forced in another direction. Though two court decisions – in 1967 and 1971 – ordered full desegregation of public schools, Muscogee County schools were not completely integrated until the 1990s.¹⁸²

The leadership of First Presbyterian in the 1950s was comprised of individuals, each with his own evaluation of civil rights. Their role in the church forced them to take work together and, sometimes, act as a unit. Civil rights was a polarizing issue able to splinter an otherwise unified body. As the issue of race relations moved to national prominence, the elders of First Presbyterian squared off in a two-year showdown. The actions of McNeill and the elders are similar to the reactions in other southern Protestant churches. When McNeill expressed his ideas on race, many members challenged his freedom to do so, insisting he should speak the opinions of his congregation. Some members expressed their displeasure with McNeill by withholding financial support from the church. Many criticized McNeill for forsaking his priestly responsibilities in favor of prophetic preaching. These responses are strikingly similar to the experiences of William

¹⁸² Whitehead and Bogart, *City of Progress*, 170; Virginia E Causey, “The Long and Winding Road: School Desegregation in Columbus, Georgia, 1963-1997,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (Fall 2001), 398.

Campbell, Ogden Dunbar, and others. Since these congregations had no contact with one another their response flowed from shared expectations or views. Southern Protestant tradition emphasized individual salvation and made people uncomfortable with addressing social issues in church. Strong lay leadership gave members the drive to communicate their dissatisfaction with ministers.

The story of McNeill and First Presbyterian Church is important for what it reveals about Columbus and how it connects to regional trends. There are commonalities among southern Protestant congregations but the events at First Presbyterian were unique to that congregation. McNeill's strong personality and commitment to racial justice elicited violent responses from First Presbyterian elders dedicated to tradition and Presbyterian polity. This story contributes to a fuller understanding of white church responses to the civil rights movement.

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