Contesting the Faith:

Late 20th Century American Evangelicalism in Black and White

An honors thesis for the Department of American Studies

Hannah Jo Dorfman

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ABSTRACT

Dominant stereotypes of American evangelical Christians as anti-intellectual, backward fundamentalists largely ignore the complex workings of race in the evangelical world. A more nuanced history of evangelical race relations is thus needed in order to highlight the intersection of race and religion in one of America's most influential Protestant traditions. My project takes on this task by providing an in-depth look at the self-identified black evangelicals of the late 20th century. Their sermons, publications and organizations illuminate the diverse ways in which black Christians contested white norms and grappled with the very term "evangelical." Some utilized secular Black Power ideology in the push for a separatist, black theology and worldview, while others advocated for a theology of racial reconciliation that engaged white Christians in an attempt to unite believers as one body of Christ. In uncovering this history, I argue that "evangelicalism" itself is a racialized term in that race dictated the very core of what it meant to be an evangelical Christian in the late 20th century.

INTRODUCTION

The word "evangelical" does not always carry positive connotations in today's world. The media are often quick to stereotype evangelicals as intolerant, anti-intellectual conservatives who vote overwhelmingly Republican and support exclusionary policies in pursuit of a hegemonic Christian worldview. Some evangelicals are fed up with this image. In 2008, a group of disgruntled Christians published "An Evangelical Manifesto" lamenting "the confusions and corruptions that attend the term *Evangelical* in the United States and much of the Western world."[1] Others, such as prominent evangelical historian Randall Balmer, declare, "Some of us have grown increasingly uneasy with the designation *evangelical* because we feel that it has been bastardized by the Religious Right, distorted so completely that it bears scant resemblance to the gospel—the 'good news'—of Jesus Christ."[2] Evangelicals themselves have called into question the very usefulness of the descriptor. The popular association of the word with a particular kind of right-wing political discourse has even prompted the urge among some to break from the term entirely.[3] These frustrations make clear that the aforementioned stereotypes obscure the vast intricacies of the evangelical imagination.

But what else might these dominant images obstruct? This thesis examines the extent to which popular connotations of the word "evangelical" ignore the complex workings of race in the American evangelical world. I aim to flesh out this

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[1] The Evangelical Manifesto Steering Committee, "An Evangelical Manifesto: A Declaration of Evangelical Identity and Public Commitment" (The Evangelical Manifesto Steering Committee, 2008), http://www.anevangelicalmanifesto.com/.

[2] Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America, an Evangelical's Lament* (New York, N.Y: Basic Books, 2006), xii.

[3] Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come*, xii.

complexity, exploring the intersectionality of race and religion in one of America's fastest growing Protestant traditions. It is my attempt to provide a more nuanced history of evangelical race relations and to discern how racial categories construct our conceptions of the very word "evangelical" and the theological principles associated with it. The characters of this story are the black and white Christians of the late 20th century who sometimes had very different ideas of what it meant to be an evangelical. I will look at the ways in which black Christians contested white evangelical norms of scriptural authority and biblical social engagement and how white evangelicals responded to these contestations. In doing so, I argue that "evangelicalism" is a racialized term. It is racialized in the sense that its principles—the very core of what it means to be an evangelical—are lived out through race, often resulting in very different manifestations of the evangelical faith.

Key Terms and Frameworks

Just what does the word "evangelical" mean? Scholars of American evangelicalism have long debated how to define the very term, and whether or not a comprehensive definition can even be applied to the diverse beliefs, denominations, organizations and ways of life that commonly fall under the umbrella of "evangelicalism." Historian David Bebbington provides what has been perhaps the most influential framework for modern scholars. Bebbington summarizes the broad range of evangelical expressions with four categories: conversion, biblical centrality,

activism and crucicentrism.[4] According to Bebbington, most evangelicals believe that Christ has the power to change lives through the process of conversion. For some, this comes in the form of being "born-again." For others, this merely implies a spiritual change that orients believers towards God. Biblical centrality encompasses the belief in the authority of the Bible in matters of spiritual concern. Bebbington's concept of activism implies the call of all evangelicals to service before God, which is especially revealed in the focus on evangelism and missions as strategies to spread Christ's word. Lastly, crucicentrism emphasizes the importance of Christ's death in the atonement of sins for humanity.[5] Many scholars of American evangelicalism, mostly notably Mark Noll and George Marsden, utilize and expand upon Bebbington's framework in their vast explorations of the evangelical tradition.

History is also a common binding factor for many evangelicals. Historian Molly Worthen's recent work on evangelicalism suggests that "history—rather than theology or politics—is the most useful tool for pinning down today's evangelicals."[6] Worthen claims that most evangelicals trace their heritage back to the religious revivals of the First and Second Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries. Evangelicals during this time used their egalitarian message and emotional fervor to appeal to believers from all walks of life, promoting a religion oriented towards social and moral activism.[7] This history, according to Worthen, is outlined by a set of common questions that most evangelicals ask themselves. Foremost among them is

[4] Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 19.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.
[7] Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 212-214.

the question of "how to resolve the tension between the demands of personal belief and the constraints of a secularized public square."[8] This tension between theology and social action is one of the central factors that figures into how black and white evangelicals in the late 20th century defined their faith.

Only recently have scholars begun to use race as a primary framework for examining the American evangelical tradition. By race, I refer to the categories of difference that are often understood to be biological but are instead socially constructed, in that certain physical characteristics are given more social worth than others.[9] Here, I take my cue from Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, who, in their influential book *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, analyze the inner workings of the racialization of American evangelicalism. Emerson and Smith define racialization as a framework that "understands that racism is not mere individual, overt prejudice or the free-floating irrational driver of race problems, but the collective misuse of power that results in diminished life opportunities for some racial groups."[10] Importantly, Emerson and Smith point out that "because racialization is embedded within the normal, everyday operation of institutions, this framework understands that people need not intend their actions to contribute to racial division and inequality for their actions to do so."[11] Emerson and Smith analyze the role religion plays in this process, ultimately arguing that white evangelical theology lends itself to

[8] Worthen, *Apostels of Reason*, 4.
[9] Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.
[10] Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 9.
[11] Ibid.

interpersonal conceptions of racism as prejudice between individuals. This consequently leads white evangelicals to, either knowingly or unknowingly, reproduce racialized structures that benefit whites and oppress people of color.[12] Using Emerson and Smith as a jumping off point, I hope to build upon existing scholarly definitions of evangelicalism by using race as a primary interpretive lens through which to view the tradition's history.

It is also my goal to show how race and evangelicalism are co-constituted categories that intersect with broader social, political and cultural factors to construct meaning. Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth McAlister's influential collection, *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas*, informs my decision to frame my topic in this way. Goldschmidt and McAlister's compilation effectively shows how "religion has been inextricably woven into both racial and national identities, to such an extent that "race," "nation," and "religion" have each defined the others. These seemingly distinct discourses of difference have at times borrowed and at times contested each other's social hierarchies, mixing and mingling in unresolved dialectics irreducible to any one term."[13] Religion and race are therefore inseparable categories that constantly create one another through a complex web of social and religious hierarchies. I hope to provide an example of how these facets of identity define each other in the world of 20th century American evangelicalism.

Throughout this thesis, I will use the terms "whiteness" and "blackness" in relation to constructions of evangelical theology. Ruth Frankenberg's definition of

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[12] Ibid., 18.
[13] Henry Goldschmidt, "Introduction: Race, Nation, and Religion," in *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3–31.

whiteness from her book *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, is most helpful in clarifying what I mean when I talk about "whiteness." Frankenberg writes, "First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint,' a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, 'whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed."[14] This set of white "cultural practices"—behaviors, mindsets and general ways of life—therefore construct evangelical theological and social standards. Whiteness is the presumed norm in evangelical culture, as it is in American culture more broadly. Thus, just as Emerson and Smith suggest, most white evangelicals understand and define their faith through the lens of whiteness.[15] Blackness, then, implies an ideological contrast to whiteness. Many black evangelicals in the late 20th century refer to blackness as cultural modes and ways of being through which they live out their evangelical faith. I therefore use the terms "whiteness" and "blackness" not as racial identifiers, but rather as ideological concepts that define evangelical reality.

In addition, the history of 20th century black evangelicalism naturally requires a discussion of the movement's relationship to other historically black Protestant denominations. Many historians place a number of African American Christian groups under the umbrella term, the "black church." Encompassed within this definition are a variety of religious traditions, spiritual practices and theological beliefs that range from black Pentecostalism to major denominations such as the

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[14] Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.
[15] Emerson and Smith, *Divided By Faith*, 18.

African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ), the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), and the National Baptist Convention.[16] The term "black church" is not meant to depict a monolithic African American religious experience, but rather a diverse group of traditions that many historians argue have "helped shape the collective black community."[17]

However, some scholars refute the usefulness of the term. Curtis Evans, in his landmark survey of African American Christianity, *The Burden of Black Religion*, argues that scholarly constructions of the "black church" often obscure the complexity of black religious life.[18] According to Evans, the "black church" as an academic construct has normalized the role of religion in the lives of African Americans.[19] Likewise, historian Barbara Savage argues that the term is itself "is a political, intellectual, and theological construction that symbolizes unity and homogeneity while masking the enormous diversity and independence among African American religious institutions and believers."[20] Her work problematizes decades of scholarship that viewed the black church as a single entity and urges scholars to focus on the diversity of black religious life and political expression.[21] Throughout my thesis, I utilize terms related to "black church" with these scholarly discussions in mind. I will use the phrases "historic black church tradition,"

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[16] Anne H Pinn and Anthony B Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2002) 16.
[17] Pinn and Pinn, *Fortress Introduction*, xii.
[18] Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4-6.
[19] Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*, 15.
[20] Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 9.
[21] Savage, *Your Spirits Walk*, 10.

"historically black Protestant denominations" and "historically black Protestant congregations" interchangeably. These terms are not meant to depict a monolithic African American religious experience or essentialize black religiosity in any way. Rather, they are meant to portray a diverse group of historically black denominations that are, as I will explain in my first chapter, largely separate from the 20th century black evangelical worldview.

Limitations and Purpose

I want to clarify that I am neither black nor an evangelical Christian. Theologically, my own Catholic religious background makes the evangelical concepts of biblical literalism and born-again spirituality somewhat foreign to me. Likewise, as a white woman, I will never be able to fully comprehend what it means to be black within American racial structures. I recognize that no academic research is unbiased, and I understand the possible analytical limitations that result from my position. I will naturally miss some aspects of the discussion because of my location in relation to the subject.

In addition, I understand that my exploration of black and white evangelicalism as parallel universes paints the landscape in binary terms. This obscures the unique experiences of other racial communities in the evangelical world. Of particular regret is my inability to devote time to the narratives of Latino/a, Asian American and other non-black marginalized evangelical communities whose stories would naturally enhance the discussion of "evangelicalism" as a racialized term. On top of this, my lack of attention to the

experiences of black women evangelicals overlooks the ways in which the tradition is not only affected by race, but also by gender. Just as I argue the term itself is racialized, it is also gendered in the sense that masculinity and heteronormativity shape the norms of evangelical culture. Women evangelicals have presumably challenged these norms, and an analysis of their experiences would address the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality within American evangelicalism. Unfortunately, these histories stretched outside the scope of my project. I understand that this approach perpetuates a perceived black-white racial binary, as well a heteronormative, masculine evangelical narrative. My purpose, however, was not to paint a broad picture of the evangelical landscape, but instead to focus specifically on how black and white evangelicals understood the word "evangelical" differently, so as to provide a clear and in-depth example as to how race functions in the American evangelical world.

In addition, I hope this narrative will add nuance to the existing scholarly definitions and histories of American evangelicalism. Building off the work of Emerson and Smith, Noll, Worthen and many others, I aim to showcase an aspect of evangelical history that scholars have only begun to explore. Very few chronicles of 20th century American evangelicalism include the stories of black evangelicals. In 2013, John Fea, Chair of the History Department at the evangelical Messiah College, wrote a blog post titled, "Where Are the Studies of Twentieth-Century Black Evangelicalism?" In it, he asked: "Where are the black evangelicals? How did Black evangelical congregations and denominations respond to Protestant fundamentalism, the rise of neo-evangelicalism, and the emergence of the Christian

Right?"[22] These are the exact questions that led me to this topic. Most existing scholarly explorations of evangelical history tell the stories of white Christians. I began to ask myself why this was and what role race played in the historical constructions of 20th century evangelicalism. This project is thus not only an attempt to examine how race and religion function simultaneously within the evangelical tradition, but also to showcase a history that is largely missing from the scholarly conversation.

Organization

My first chapter situates black evangelicals within their 20th century historical context. It details black evangelical struggles with the legacies of history and identity, positioning the movement in relation to white evangelicalism as well as the historic black church tradition. In doing so, this chapter highlights the unique position of black evangelicals and examines how and why they came to a renewed racial consciousness in the late 20th century. The second and third chapters analyze the different ways black evangelicals used this consciousness to contest white norms, situating their responses within the wider cultural context of the Civil Rights movement, Black Power and black liberation theology movements. The second chapter specifically examines black Protestants who applied separatist strategies to create a distinct black evangelical theology and worldview. The third and final

[22] John Fea, "Where Are the Studies of Twentieth-Century Black Evangelicalism?," *Anxious Bench*, accessed October 30, 2014, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2013/01/where-are-the-studies-of-twentieth-century-black-evangelicalism/.

chapter looks at black evangelical leaders who took a more integrationist approach, preferring reconciliation with white evangelicals to black Christian nationalism.

I have decided to structure my analysis in this way for several reasons. The first chapter, which focuses on the history of black evangelicalism and the consciousness that resulted when black evangelicals came to terms with this history naturally sets up a subsequent examination of what black evangelicals did with this consciousness. The second and third chapters therefore provide examples of how black evangelicals used both nationalism and integrationism as strategies to expand their racial awareness. Prominent black theologian James Cone's famous essay, "Martin and Malcolm: Integrationism and Nationalism in African American Religious History," informed my decision to separate the second and third chapters in this way. In his book, Cone contextualizes the historical tension between these two strategies. He argues that the dichotomy between integrationism and nationalism is not as clear-cut as many historians suggest. For Cone, the two are interconnected—they work together in different ways to shape how black Americans fight injustice.[23] While they rest on differing assumptions about the possibilities African Americans have to achieve full social, political and cultural equality, they both work toward the common goal of uniting black Americans "in a common struggle for justice and freedom."[24] Thus, I have separated the two categories thematically in order to highlight these tensions and interrelationships. I hope to showcase how black evangelical leaders simultaneously applied both integrationist and nationalist lenses

[23] James Cone, "Martin and Malcolm: Integrationism and Nationalism in African American Religious History," in *Religion and American Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 411.
[24] Cone, "Martin and Malcolm," 410.

to their theologies and organizations. They critiqued one another's strategies and adapted one another's ideas all for the common goal of challenging white evangelical norms, cultivating a black evangelical consciousness and fighting for racial justice.

CHAPTER 1 BLACK AND EVANGELICAL IN THE MID 20TH CENTURY

In order to situate 20th century black evangelicalism within its historical context, we must first ask what it meant to be both black and evangelical in the mid 1900s. How did black Christians who defined themselves as evangelicals think about their faith in relation to racial identity? What tensions arose that drove some black Christians to accept the term "evangelical" and others to reject it? A brief look at the path black Christians took through the mid-century religious landscape reveals a complex picture. The activist tone of the Civil Rights movement brought to light the glaringly racialized culture of white evangelicalism, spurring many black Protestants to reflect on their position within American Christianity. In this chapter, I will analyze the ways in which black evangelicals in the latter half of the 20th century grappled with histories of oppression within white evangelical settings and the influence these experiences had on their religious identities. I argue that black evangelicals occupied a unique space within American Christianity—a space outside the structures of the historically black churches yet racially alienated from the institutions and theological models of white evangelicalism.

First, I will establish a working definition of "black evangelicalism" by examining the movement's history within the educational institutions of white fundamentalism, as well as its connections to the historically black Protestant denominations that make up what many scholars call the "black church." Examining these two histories side by side will highlight the unique position of modern black evangelicals who, despite being brought up in white theological settings, remained intimately connected to the black racial experience. Next, I will introduce some of

the key leaders of the 20th century black evangelical movement, highlighting their efforts to understand how the racialized nature of white Christianity altered their own awareness. I will highlight some of the tensions that surfaced as a result of these historical confrontations, setting the stage for my second and third chapters which examine the diverse strategies black evangelicals employed in order to make sense of their identity struggles.

A Murky History

To begin, I must clarify what I mean when I use the category "black evangelicalism." As I emphasized in my introduction, a concrete definition of the term "evangelicalism" is itself hard to come by. The addition of a racial determinant makes the label even more difficult to categorize, as the history of contemporary black evangelicalism is hard to separate from the histories of both white evangelicalism and the historic black church tradition. I echo the call of scholars such as Milton Sernett, Gayraud Wilmore, and George Marsden not to place historically black Protestant congregations under the category of "evangelicalism" for reasons that will become clear as I examine the historical relationship between the black church tradition and white evangelicalism.[25]

Scholars themselves have struggled to craft a clear lineage of modern black evangelicalism precisely because the movement has roots in these two competing

[25] Milton Sernett, "Black Religion and the Question of Evangelical Identity," in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Knoxville: The Uniersity of Tennessee Press, 1991); Gayraud S. Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 1st ed., The C. Eric Lincoln Series on Black Religion (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1972); George M. Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991).

histories. The main body of scholarship on black evangelicalism looks closely at the 18th and 19th century evangelical heritage of the historic black church tradition and then skips to the 1960s as the starting point of the modern black evangelical movement.[26] This approach glosses over the ways in which the tides in early 20th century white evangelicalism influenced emerging black evangelical leaders. Proponents of this way of thinking about the tradition include historians of American Christianity Gayraud Wilmore, Milton Sernett and George Marsden.[27] This camp rightly points out how many historically black Protestant denominations trace their roots to the evangelical revivals of the First and Second Great Awakenings, thus forming part of the "classic American evangelical tradition" in their commitment to spiritual egalitarianism and vision for social reform.[28] As Milton Sernett explains, in the early stages of the American evangelical movement, black Christians and white evangelicals were "bound together by an emphasis upon the need for an inward conversion experience and the desire to create new communities based upon equality in the spirit rather than the conventional social canons."[29] Even though they would ultimately go their separate ways in the 19th

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[26] Albert Miller, "The Rise of African-American Evangelicalism in American Culture," in *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture*, ed. Peter Williams (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 260.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Albert Miller, "The Construction of a Black Fundamentalist Worldview: The Role of Bible Schools," in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2000), 717.
[29] Milton Sernett, "Black Religion and the Question of Evangelical Identity," in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Knoxville: The Uniersity of Tennessee Press, 1991), 139.

century, the black church tradition naturally shares a historical narrative with the broader evangelical movement.

As the evangelical message spread throughout antebellum America, black Christians became aware of the racial realities of white evangelical "egalitarianism." Apart from the few white Christians who used their faith to fight for abolition, evangelicals in the 19th century largely failed to challenge the racial status quo.[30] As a result, black Christians began to build autonomous communities in which to express their racial and religious identities outside the sphere of white evangelicalism. As historian Albert Raboteau describes it, "the opportunity for black religious separatism was due to the egalitarian character of evangelical Protestantism; its necessity was due, in part, to the racism of white Evangelicals."[31] These separate black Christian groups, which many scholars now identify as the historic black church tradition, thus seldom associated with the word "evangelical" because of the movement's connection to white racism. Among many historically black Protestant denominations, the word evangelical thus "has little historical relevance."[32] As a result, even though they share similar theological tenets and a common heritage, I argue that the historic black church tradition does not fit into the broader category of "evangelicalism."

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[30] Nancy Wadsworth, *Ambivalent Miracles: Evangelicals and the Politics of Racial Healing* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), 42.
[31] Albert Raboteau, "The Black Experience and American Evangelicalism: The Meaning of Slavery," in *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, ed. Leonard I. Sweet (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997) 183.
[32] William H Bentley, "Bible Believers in the Black Community," in *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They Are Changing*, ed. David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge (New York: Abington Press, 1975), 110.

It is important to note that even with this split, there were a small number of black Christians who embraced the label "evangelical" in the early and mid 20th century. These are the characters of our story, the black Christians who, for various reasons, consciously adopted the name "evangelical" and grappled with the theological and social connotations the label carried. The narratives of these figures are situated within the histories of 20th century fundamentalism and neoevangelicalism, two religious movements dominated by white Protestants.

The history of white fundamentalism stretches back to late 19th and early 20th century developments in American evangelicalism. At a time when the nation was rapidly changing, many evangelical denominations experienced internal theological debates concerning scripture, doctrine and science.[33] While most of these debates remained within individual denominations, by the 1920s, the controversies between theologically liberal and conservative evangelicals arrived in the public sphere, where figures such as William Jennings Bryan and J. Gresham Machen fought against theological liberalism, cultural modernism and the teaching of Darwinism in public schools.[34] Their "modernist" challengers pushed for a more liberal interpretation of scripture, a theological framework that was, in their view, readily adaptable to the social and scientific advancements of modern society. The debates culminated in the public defeat of William Jennings Bryan and his "conservative Christian worldview hegemony" at the 1925 Scopes trial.[35] Throughout these disputes, conservative evangelical leaders such as Dwight L.

[33] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 103.
[34] Marsden, *Fundamentalist and American Culture*, 5.
[35] Miller, "The Construction," 713

Moody and A. B. Simpson built a network of churches, missionary training centers and Bible schools that aimed to arm conservative evangelicals with the fundamentals of the Christian faith.[36] These institutions, most notably the Moody Bible Institute, known by some as the "West Point of Fundamentalism," facilitated the growth of a strong fundamentalist subculture.[37] Using this powerful network, fundamentalists largely withdrew from mainstream culture. Their inclination towards separatism was not a shameful retreat from the public sphere after the failure of the Scopes trial, but rather a strategic decision to build a flourishing culture apart from the influence of liberal Christianity.[38]

While white Protestants mainly dominated early 20th century fundamentalism, historian Albert G. Miller suggests that a small group of black Christians fell under the influence of the Bible School movement. Miller argues that some Bible schools established by white fundamentalists were in fact specifically targeted to suppress the influence of liberal Protestantism in a few historically black church communities.[39] According to Miller, "most of these Bible schools were organized by white fundamentalists, and most had some connection with Moody Bible Institute."[40] Schools established from the 1920s to the 1940s, such as the Southern Bible Institute, founded in Dallas in 1928 and the Carver Bible Institute, founded in Atlanta in 1943, contributed to the growth of a distinct black Christian

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[36] Virginia Lieson Brereton, *Training God's Army: The American Bible School, 1880-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) xiii-xvii.
[37] Brereton, *Training God's Army*, 139.
[38] Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 43-53.
[39] Miller, "The Construction," 718.
[40] Ibid.

fundamentalist subculture—a subculture that nurtured many of the self-identified black evangelical leaders of the late 20th century.[41]

The characters of our story are also products of the American neoevangelical movement. In the 1940s and 1950s, evangelical leaders fashioned a middle ground between the rigid models of fundamentalism and the modernism of liberal Protestantism. As fundamentalists continued to cultivate their Christian following on the fringes of society, white evangelicals such as Billy Graham, Carl Henry, and Harold Ockenga sought to reform fundamentalism and accentuate the intellectual respectability of their Christian worldview. In addition, they encouraged evangelicals to interpret their faith through the lens of social engagement, developing models of Church Growth and evangelism in order to expand their burgeoning subculture.[42] They founded organizations such as the National Association of Evangelicals, Campus Crusades for Christ, InterVarsity Press and the periodical *Christianity Today*, bringing thousands of believers into the evangelical fold and facilitating interdenominational conversations that united evangelicals around common spiritual causes.[43] They championed an evangelicalism that engaged culturally, socially and intellectually with the public sphere without compromising the conservative theological rigor of their fundamentalist forefathers.[44]

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[41] Ibid.
[42] Worthen*, Apostles of Reason*, 24-29.
[43] Paul Boyer, "The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism," in *Rightward Bound: Making American Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 29–51.
[44] Worthen, *Apostles of Reason,* 32-35.

Like the fundamentalists before them, neoevangelicals established seminaries and Bible Institutes in order to provide evangelicals with the practical tools for social engagement. Notable institutions such as Fuller Theological Seminary, founded in Pasadena, California in 1947 by white evangelical leaders Charles E. Fuller and Harold Ockenga, aimed to "resist the separatism of the time and be a force for the renewal and broadening of fundamentalism and evangelicalism."[45] Several black Christians critically important to the story of modern black evangelicalism found themselves within these institutions. Their experiences within the fundamentalist and neoevangelical Bible Schools and seminaries opened their eyes to a culture whose theological concepts and social goals were overwhelmingly white. Reflecting on these experiences, black evangelicals in the latter half of the 20th century confronted how their racial identities had been neglected through the white values of a largely white movement. I will now turn to the narratives of these leaders, whose calls for a coming to consciousness among black evangelicals in the mid 20th century encouraged a flourishing culture of black evangelical social engagement that challenged white Protestant norms throughout the 20th century.

A New Generation of Leaders, A New Consciousness

African American Pentecostal minister William Hiram Bentley is a central figure in the story of modern black evangelicalism. Born in Chicago in 1924 to a devoted Pentecostal family, Bentley spent his childhood as an active member of his

[45] Fuller Theological Seminary, "Our History," accessed April 26, 2015, http://fuller.edu/About/History-and-Facts/Our-History/.

local holiness church. As a teenager, Bentley yearned for something more than his weekly Sunday School classes. He longed for the intellectual rigor of leading white evangelicals like Carl Henry and Wilbur Smith, whose books Bentley read in his "insatiable quest for knowledge."[46] In search of a more formal education, Bentley ventured to the nearby Roosevelt University, a private, non-religiously affiliated institution located outside of Chicago. After receiving his Bachelor's degree from Roosevelt in 1956, Bentley went on to pursue theological training at Fuller Theological Seminary, where he was the first African American to receive a Bachelor's of Divinity in 1959.[47] Fuller, one of the most influential evangelical seminaries to come out of the neoevangelical movement, introduced Bentley to the principles of social and intellectual engagement championed by Fuller's white evangelical founders. His education at Fuller also exposed him to the harsh realities of racism outside his predominately black Pentecostal church. In reflecting on his growth within white evangelical institutions, Bentley writes, "I have come to see, if not to fully understand, how deeply rooted American racial prejudice is, and how myopic many otherwise good people can be to its prevalence! It infests and infects all of us—Fundamentalist, Evangelical, liberal, neo-liberal, secularist, etc."[48] During his time at Fuller, Bentley questioned how his experiences within white evangelical institutions influenced his religious and racial identities.

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[46] William H Bentley and Ruth Lewis Bentley, "Reflections on the Scope and Function of a Black Evangelical Black Theology," in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. Kenneth S Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1990), 300.
[47] Miller, "The Rise," 267.
[48] Bentley and Bentley, "Reflections on the Scope and Function of a Black Evangelical Black Theology," 301.

While the Bible schools and seminaries of white evangelicalism gave Bentley direct exposure to white Christianity, he still remained intimately connected to the black community. "The black evangelical is an integral part of the black community," Bentley tells us, "Try as he may, and many do, he cannot escape from his identity as an indissoluble part of Afro-American humanity."[49] For Bentley, this meant that the black evangelical's "relationship to the larger white world of evangelicalism therefore, cannot be divorced from this social reality."[50] Bentley's black heritage was thus an essential category that defined his experiences within white evangelicalism. His exposure to white Christianity and his intimate connection to the black community thus situated him in a liminal space between two very different worlds.

Within this space, Bentley felt alienated from his home church because of his experiences within white evangelicalism. He regrets how his education in white settings sometimes caused him to impose white standards on the historically black Protestant congregations of his youth, specifically in terms of worship practices and theological liberalism. He recalls his blind acceptance of the evangelical dogma "that theological orthodoxy was incompatible with the free expression of emotion characteristic of the less status-oriented churches of the black masses."[51] Likewise, Bentley noticed how his evangelical brethren, both black and white, criticized the black church for its "improper" use of Christian scripture.[52] According to Bentley, most black evangelicals he knew failed to challenge these criticisms of the historic

[49] Bentley, "Bible Believers in the Black Community," 109.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 110.
[52] William H Bentley, *The National Black Evangelical Association: Reflections on the Evolution of a Concept of Ministry* (Chicago: The National Black Evangelical Association, 1974), 6.

black church tradition, and therefore "returned to [their] communities seeing the black church through white eyes."[53] In short, white evangelical criticisms of historically black Protestant congregations permeated Bentley's black evangelical mindset, creating a disconnect between him and the congregation in which he was raised.

Bentley was not the only black Protestant to confront these issues. Recognizing how white Christian settings had impacted their identities, many black evangelicals began to question the racial realities of white evangelicalism. One of those Christians was William Pannell. Born in 1929 in the small town of Sturgis, Michigan, Pannell converted to Christ at the age of seventeen at an evangelical revival meeting.[54] Shortly thereafter, Pannell went on to attend the majority white Fort Wayne Bible College in Indiana, one of the oldest non-denominational evangelical Bible Schools.[55] In college, Pannell became highly active in the white evangelical world. After his time at Fort Wayne, he went on to travel as an evangelist and song leader for the Brethren Assemblies in southern Michigan, a denomination that was at the time mostly populated by white evangelicals.[56] He served as the youth director for the Brethren Assemblies from 1955 to 1965, where he met and worked closely with the prominent progressive white evangelical leader Jim

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[53] Bentley, "Bible Believers in the Black Community," 110.
[54] Billy Graham Center Archives, "Interviews of William E. Pannell - Collection 498," accessed April 26, 2015, http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/498.htm.
[55] Taylor University, "Our Story," accessed April 26, 2015, http://www.taylor.edu/about/heritage/.
[56] Billy Graham Center Archives, "Interviews of William E. Pannell – Collection 498."

Wallis.[57] Shortly thereafter, he took a position as a staff evangelist with Youth for Christ, a ministry organization in which famous white evangelist Billy Graham got his start.[58]

In 1968, Pannell published his startling critique of white evangelical racism titled, *My Friend, the Enemy*. In it, he condemned the white church for failing to provide a space for black Christians to express their racial identities. Pannell reflects on his involvement within predominately white evangelical denominations, characterizing black evangelicals like himself as "speckled birds, lonely and unacknowledged except in some token way so as to ease the parent conscience."[59] Pannell felt as if white evangelicals were using him to give their traditions the façade of racial inclusion. They were not, in his experience, engaging with issues of race on any meaningful level. Their commitment to social engagement only focused on evangelism, on preparing Christians to preach the gospel and save souls. It wasn't until the visible struggles of the Civil Rights movement that Pannell gained a sense of justice. Pannell saw racial horrors on the news, he heard Martin Luther King speak and he soon came to realize that "Bible school has nothing to do with justice."[60] He came to comprehend that "the same conservative brother who refuses to link my social needs with his preaching of the Gospel is the same man who lobbies against the Supreme Court, fluoride in the water, and pornographic

[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] William E Pannell, *My Friend, the Enemy* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1968), 54.
[60] Pannell, *My Friend, the Enemy*, 64.

literature."[61] For Pannell, white biblical social engagement did not at all reflect his needs as a black Christian.

Inspired by Pannell, other black evangelical leaders offered personal commentaries on race and evangelicalism. Tom Skinner, a charismatic evangelist who worked closely with Pannell to lead evangelical crusades throughout the United States published *How Black is the Gospel?* in 1970. In it, Skinner, who will become an important figure in my third chapter, lamented his experiences with a white Christ. For Skinner, the Christ of his youth was "a contemptuous symbol to the black man of all the fakery and chicanery endorsed by so many white Christians."[62] He writes, "the impression I had of Jesus from the white society that preached about Him was as the defender of the American system, president of the New York Stock Exchange, head of the Pentagon, chairman of the National Republican Committee—a flag-waving, patriotic American—and against everything else."[63] Skinner could not believe "that this kind of Christ would die for black people."[64] The image of Jesus that white evangelicals preached was, for Skinner, the wrong kind of Christ. This Christ did not speak to the black experience or address at all evangelicalism's role in perpetuating the racial status quo.

The same year Skinner published *How Black is the Gospel?*, disgruntled evangelical student duo Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm circulated their book *Your God is Too White*, a gripping look at the way whiteness structured American evangelicalism. Behm, a white evangelical student with degrees from fundamentalist

[61] Ibid., 64-65.
[62] Tom Skinner, *How Black Is the Gospel?* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970) 35.
[63] Skinner, *How Black*, 68.
[64] Skinner, *How Black*, 35.

leader Albert B. Simpson's famous Missionary Training Institute, as well as evangelicalism's renowned Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, partnered with prominent black evangelical activist Columbus Salley to call out white evangelical complicity in racist structures. In the opening pages of *Your God is Too White*, Salley and Behm cried, "Blacks were (and are) excluded from the benefits of American life in the name of a Christianity which blesses the status quo."[65] They asked, "How can Christianity be updated or redefined to deal with everyday problems of race? How can the negative images of Christianity be changed? Is Christ capable of dealing with a black man as a black man?"[66] Salley and Behm explored the Christ they had come to know and how they had come to know him, critically reflecting on how normative evangelical theology and the presentation of Christ as a white American nationalist had obscured their identities as both black and white Christians. Salley and Behm's contemplations boldly confronted a faith whose values of social engagement only exacerbated racial inequality.

While the majority of white evangelicals remained silent on racial issues, some progressive white Christians heeded the messages of incensed black evangelicals. These Christians were situated within the emerging evangelical left of the 1960s and 1970s, a group of mostly white Christians who felt that neoevangelical social engagement was not applying the evangelical faith to the real injustices of American society. White evangelical leaders such as John Alexander, a former student at the evangelical powerhouse Wheaton College, Jim Wallis, a

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[65] Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm, *Your God Is Too White* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970) 13.
[66] Salley and Behm, *Your God Is Too White*, 11.

graduate of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Ronald Sider, author of the famous evangelical social justice manifesto *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, prompted biblically minded Christians to think about the social implications of their faith.[67] Their publications and organizations such as Wallis' *Sojourners*, Alexander's *The Other Side* and Sider's Evangelicals for Social Action took up issues of race and class inequality in American society. They compelled evangelicals to think about systems of privilege and oppression from a Christian standpoint and understand their complicity within these structures.[68] However, even with the small but concerted involvement from white evangelicals on the left, black leaders felt their needs would not be addressed unless they came together on their own to develop their newly emerging racial consciousness.

Coming Together: The National Black Evangelical Association

In 1963, William Bentley and a team of black evangelicals in Los Angeles founded the National Negro Evangelical Association (NNEA), or as it is now called, the National Black Evangelical Association (NBEA). The body was to serve as an umbrella organization that united black evangelical Christians across denominational lines. Bentley, who himself served as the organization's president from 1970 to 1976, attributed the group's founding to the "deeply felt need for meaningful fellowship among black Americans of evangelical persuasion," a

[67] Brantley W. Gasaway, "'Glimmers of Hope': Progressive Evangelicals and Racism, 1965-2000," in Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion after Divided by Faith, ed. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 72–99.
[68] Ibid.

fellowship he and other African American evangelicals did not find amidst "the existing racial realities within white evangelicalism."[69] As a counterpart to the National Association of Evangelicals, a neoevangelical group that failed to address issues of race, the National Black Evangelical Association focused its early efforts on ministry to black Christians and the cultivation of a black evangelical awareness that showcased the diverse social and theological needs of the African American community.[70]

Bentley notes how the NBEA's early leaders came to terms with their backgrounds in white evangelical institutions. "A glance at our earliest programs at the Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, and Cleveland conventions will show how pervasive the ideas were among us that the 'best' and 'proper' methods for reaching our people, and indeed all people, were those we had learned within the Bible schools and theological seminaries of white evangelicalism," Bentley writes.[71] For Bentley and his contemporaries within the NBEA, organizing a black evangelical awareness meant coming to terms with the extent to which white evangelical culture dictated the black experience.[72] For many black evangelicals, an exploration of this history prompted a realization of how they had come to view their faith and their communities through a white lens.

This realization brought to light the discontinuity between members of the NBEA and the historic black church. Bentley details how early leaders specifically struggled with this disconnect in terms of organizational structure and support.

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[69] Bentley, *The NBEA,* 1.
[70] Ibid., 1-3.
[71] Ibid., 1.
[72] Ibid., 2-3.

Unsure from where to draw funding for their nascent organization, early leaders of the NBEA "had little awareness of the fact that there were resources within [the black] community which had been gained through being forged in the fires of oppression and had not been exhausted by the passage of time."[73] Instead of acknowledging these resources, the emerging NBEA contemplated how they were going to survive as an organization without white leadership and financial support. Those inside the organization often failed to recognize "the equally historical fact that the black church has been independent of white Christianity in its economic survival and ministry."[74] The resulting tension left the organization in an in between space, a space where black evangelicals, alienated and frustrated with the racial realities of white evangelicalism, were unable to fully tap into the resources of more established historically black congregations.

On top of organizational issues, the development of the NBEA's clear-cut ideological goals was also not a seamless process. Bentley notes how many of the organization's early conventions were plagued by dissent, faction, and debate. According to Bentley, many attendees of the organization's 1969 convention in Atlanta "were totally unprepared for the 'militant' emphasis that broke forth."[75] In Atlanta, it was clear that "the lines were very neatly drawn between those blacks who were more conservative and who had enjoyed a closer relationship with white denominations and the evangelical establishment, and those who felt that a more conscious attempt ought to be made to freely accept our culture and relate the

[73] Ibid., 4.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., 8.

Gospel within that context."[76] The split between more traditional and more radical black evangelicals only worsened at the 1970 convention in New York where "the trend toward almost unrestricted radicalism and rabid 'get white-ism' apparently emerged triumphant."[77] The result was a large-scale "exodus" of both black and white members of the organization, who concluded that the NBEA "was developing into a bunch of fanatical, white-hating, bigoted black racists."[78] Because of this, the nascent organization experienced division between those who were more engaged with the white evangelical community and those who saw the increasing need for black evangelical separatism. In the early 1970s, young radical black evangelicals would come to have the strongest voice in the organization and would continue on a path focused on cultivating a separate black Christian identity, an identity that will become the focus of my next chapter.[79]

Conclusion

In the mid 20th century, black evangelicals faced a crisis of identity. Having been educated in the majority white settings of the fundamentalist and neoevangelical Bible School movement of the early 1900s, the self-identified black evangelicals of the 1960s and 1970s confronted the ways in which the racial structures of white evangelicalism had obscured their own identities as black Christians. The intellectual currents among black evangelical leaders during this

[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 10.
[78] Ibid., 9.
[79] David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, 1st ed, Politics and Culture in Modern America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 190.

time identified the extent to which whiteness permeated American evangelicalism. The churches they were raised in were white, the institutions they attended were white, the theology they adhered to was white and the Christ they had come to know was white. In short, they were they were black evangelical Christians living in a white evangelical world.

As a result, they faced a strong disconnect from the broader black church community. Black evangelicals criticized the worship practices and theological liberalism of many historically black Protestant denominations, distancing themselves from their own communities and compelling them to impose white standards when evaluating black Christians who did not actively call themselves "evangelical." Consequently, as black evangelicals came together to establish their own organizations, they found it difficult to recognize and access the immense resources of the historic black church. Because white evangelicalism largely neglected their racial needs and the black church remained distant, African American evangelicals forged their own path within American Christianity in the late 20th century. They created a space for themselves in which to simultaneously love God and their racial identities as black Christians. They also cultivated a culture that actively challenged the evangelical racial status quo. The next two chapters focus on two different strategies black evangelicals employed to accomplish these tasks.

CHAPTER 2 THE WRONG KIND OF CHRIST

In 1976, Clarence Hilliard, a leading black evangelical and pastor of Chicago's Circle Evangelical Free Church, wrote an article in *Christianity Today* proclaiming, "The black Christ calls the world to become black, to deny everything for what can only be a nigger's death—the cross."[80] The article, titled "Down with the Honky Christ; Up with the Funky Jesus," was a call to white evangelicals to "deny their theological whiteness" and see Christ as the embodiment of the black experience.[81] Hilliard's demand that Christ be seen as ontologically black reflects how many African American evangelicals in the late 20th century reinterpreted white theology and reformed what evangelical social engagement looked like. For some, this process involved moving from settings that perpetuated whiteness into spaces where they could cultivate an evangelicalism centered on black identity.

This chapter focuses on the late 20th century black evangelicals whose theological views and social strategies propelled them towards nationalism. I examine the black evangelical leaders of the 1970s and early 1980s who constructed a Christianity that helped believers understand religion through the cultural and spiritual motifs of the black experience. Through organizations such as the National Black Evangelical Association and the National Black Christian Students Conference, African American leaders nurtured black institutions whose focus was primarily on ministry to the black community. In this chapter I will address how black evangelicals embraced and critiqued 20th century social movements such as

[80] Clarence Hilliard and Matthew Avery Sutton, "Down with the Honky Christ," in *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents* (Bedford/St. Martin's, n.d.).
[81] Clarence Hilliard "Down with the Honky Christ," 67.

Black Power, as well as theological trends like black liberation theology. In addition, I explore how nascent black evangelical organizations interacted with white Christianity. In doing so, I aim to show how a confrontation with history caused some black evangelicals to focus on the black community and deepen their racial consciousness in order to better understand their suffering as members of Christ's true body of believers.

The Context for Black Power and Black Theology

For some black evangelicals, the development of racial awareness involved relating Black Power ideology to the evangelical experience. The Black Power movement, a social and political force in the late 1960s and early 1970s, stressed the importance of black self-love, self-definition and self-determination.[82] Organizers like Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale worked to build this awareness among black Americans. Through institutions such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a youth organization that developed out of the Civil Rights movement and grew to adopt Black Power ideology in the late 1960s, Black Power leaders asserted a new black consciousness in response to the persistence of racial oppression after the Civil Rights movement.[83] While there is not an all-encompassing definition of Black Power, the main goals of the movement, as expressed by its leaders, were to affirm the total humanity of

[82] E Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama, "Black Power Movement," in *Encyclopedia of Black Studies* (SAGE, 2005), 144.
[83] "Black Power." King Institute Encyclopedia. Accessed April 26, 2015. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_black_power/.

black people against a white racist society that dehumanized them.[84] The political, economic and cultural platforms Black Power advocates proposed encouraged African Americans to take control of their own communities in order to construct systems in which blackness did not carry negative cultural connotations.[85] Black Power ideology was highly influential in black politics and culture until the movement's dissipation in the mid-1970s.[86]

During its reign, the Black Power movement both influenced and was influenced by black religious communities. While the movement largely focused on the political, economic and cultural remedies to a white supremacist society, religion was not absent in Black Power dialogue. Some black nationalist leaders such as Huey Newton criticized religion, arguing that the racialized structures of religious institutions only exacerbated the plight of blacks in American society.[87] In the early stages of the Black Panther Party, both Newton and Seale were skeptical towards religion at best. Others like Stokely Carmichael enjoyed a closer relationship with religion. Carmichael, a Christian himself, believed that the black revolution and black religion went hand in hand. Carmichael utilized Christianity to affirm his blackness and support the political and social empowerment of African Americans.[88] Thus, while Black Power leaders were largely active in the political and

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[84] Ibid.
[85] Asante and Mazama, "Black Power Movement," 144.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Judson L. Jeffries, *Huey P. Newton: The Radical Theorist* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2006) 5.
[88] Peniel E. Joseph, *Stokely: A Life*, 1st edition (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2014), 70.

social realms, religion was for some a liberating force that supported the right of African Americans to affirm their own humanity.

Religious communities themselves varied in their opinions of Black Power. Some black Christian theologians embraced Black Power ideology. Chief among them was James Cone, an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church who began teaching at Union Theological Seminary in 1970.[89] Cone, who is regarded as the founder of black liberation theology, used a Black Power framework to reimagine a Christianity that redeemed the humanity of black Americans. Cone's pioneering works *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), reprimanded the white Church for its complicity in racist structures and its support of an oppressive, white gospel.[90] Cone argued that Black Power is the only interpretive lens through which Christians can construct "a theology whose sole purpose is to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression."[91] Cone's proposed black liberation theology related Black Power thought to the emancipating capability of the gospel of Jesus Christ. His theology "entailed a commitment to Christ as a radical, black Messiah who, in keeping with the will of God, was concerned with the disruption of institutions and mind-sets that only reinforced the status quo."[92] For Cone, true Christianity relied on being able to see Christ as a black radical and relate the Word of God to the African American experience. For him, this theological framework was

[89] "James H. Cone | Union Theological Seminary," accessed April 15, 2015, https://utsnyc.edu/academics/faculty/james-h-cone/.
[90] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), 31.
[91] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 31.
[92] Pinn and Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History*, 142.

possible through the lens of Black Power, and it was the duty of all Christians, white and black, to live out this theology in order to create a just Church in God's image.

Other Christians were hesitant to accept the political aims and sometimes-violent strategies of black power activists. As Cone describes in *Black Theology and Black Power*, "most churches see an irreconcilable conflict between Christianity and Black Power" due to the militant tendencies of some within the movement.[93] Additionally, white Christians had difficulty with Black Power because it required them, just as Clarence Hilliard asked, to make Christ "the very essence of blackness".[94] Cone explained how "White liberal preference for a raceless Christ serves only to make official and orthodox the centuries-old portrayal of Christ as white."[95] The idea of Christ as ontologically black destroyed the foundations upon which the white American church was built, Cone argues, making it an uneasy ideology for white Christians to understand and digest. As a result, the general response of white Christians to Black Power was one of distaste.

Black Power and black liberation theology provide the context for thinking about how some black evangelicals interpreted their faith in the late 20th century. I will turn now to the black evangelicals who adopted, critiqued and altered the ideas of Carmichael, Cone and other black leaders active in the two movements. I will analyze their theologies, their politics and the organizations they founded in order to show that for some black evangelicals, separation and nationalism provided the true route to Christian salvation.

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[93] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 2.
[94] Ibid., 69.
[95] Ibid., 68.

Black Power Evangelicals

In the early 1970s, frustrated students at integrated evangelical seminaries and universities delved deep into Black Power thought. Students such as Salley and Behm, figures we encountered in the first chapter, contemplated Black Power as a practical solution to the racial inequities that persisted in the evangelical church. According to Salley and Behm, Black Power ideology was an essential revolutionary force that gave black Americans the ability to recognize and assert their humanity. "Black power," they argued, "begins with the realization that blacks have been conditioned by white institutions to hate themselves and to question their basic worth."[96] Salley and Behm therefore asserted the need for black Christians to reevaluate their experiences, affirm their humanity and confront racism within the institutionalized church. In this way, they saw Black Power as a "positive force" for Christians to create consciousness and community.[97]

In addition, Black Power gave African American students an avenue through which to promote and love their blackness. In an interview in John Alexander's progressive evangelical magazine, *The Other Side*, Salley and other self-defined Black Power evangelicals stressed the importance of redefining their blackness. Carl Ellis, a leading black evangelical who has held posts at a number of evangelical seminaries, emphasized that "we live in a society that has a built-in feature that

[96] Salley and Behm, *Your God is Too White*, 65.
[97] Salley and Behm, *Your God is Too White*, 83.

negates my blackness; it negates a part of me."[98] Ellis was no stranger to the way the white evangelical world invalidated his racial experiences. Having studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, white fundamentalist leader J. Gresham Machen's contribution to the Bible School movement, as well as Francis Schaeffer's famous L'Ábri Fellowship in Switzerland, an evangelical community established in 1955 which "sought to provide a shelter from the pressures of a relentlessly secular 20th century," Ellis was well aware of the ways in which the institutions of white evangelicalism quashed his black identity.[99] For Ellis, an important part of reclaiming humanity involved reinterpreting blackness as something positive, rather than internalizing the negative images of blackness dictated by mainstream society. Embracing black identity through the ideology of Black Power gave him and many other African American evangelicals the chance to assert their humanity within structures that otherwise dehumanized and neglected them.

While some black evangelicals found Black Power ideology suitable for reinterpreting the collective black experience, they did not believe that Black Power alone could address the spiritual needs of African American Protestants. Instead, they combined Black Power ideology with faith in Jesus Christ to form what Dan Orme, an associate editor of *Freedom Now* magazine, the predecessor to Alexander's *The Other Side*, called "a Christian form of black power."[100] Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm, for example, encouraged all evangelicals, blacks as well as whites, to

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[98] Dan Orme, "Black Militant Evangelicals: An Interview," *The Other Side* 5, no. 5 (October 1969), 22.
[99] "Rev. Dr. Carl F. Ellis, Jr.," *Ellis Perspectives*, accessed April 26, 2015, http://ellisperspectives.com/biography/carl; "L'Abri Fellowship: History," *L'Abri Fellowship*, accessed April 26, 2015, http://www.labri.org/history.html.
[100] Orme, "Black Militant Evngelicals," 21.

reinterpret Christianity through the lens of blackness. They especially encouraged black Christians "to evaluate the Bible independently—free from white intimidation—as it pertains to race *and* to other universal aspects of the human dilemma."[101] Salley and other Black Power evangelicals urged African American Protestants to set their own terms and reconstruct a Christianity that worked for them. They promoted a religion that did not negate blackness, but one that spoke to it and supported it. Like James Cone, Black Power evangelicals upheld a tradition that used blackness as the primary interpretive lens for understanding Christianity. For Carl Ellis, "letting Christ live through my blackness elevates me from a half man to a whole man, redeemed by the grace of God in Christ Jesus."[102] Thus, after confronting their history within the confines of white evangelicalism, black Christians in the late 1960s and early 1970s turned to a framework that would allow them to reinvent their identity as both black Americans and as Christians. Black Power thus provided a useful basis for fostering a stronger black evangelical consciousness.

Evangelical Criticisms of Black Power

Some within the evangelical community were concerned with the militant emphasis of Black Power ideology. White evangelicals especially critiqued the aggressive tone of Black Power activism as anti-Christian.[103] Evangelicals who embraced black power thought were therefore forced to defend their revolutionary

[101] Salley and Behm, *Your God is Too White*, 84.
[102] Orme, "Black Militant Evangelicals," 22.
[103] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 2.

temperament within a white culture that appeared uncomfortable with bold racial confrontation. Prominent evangelist Tom Skinner, a figure who will become a major focus of my next chapter, defended militancy as truly Biblical. In a speech at the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's 1970 Urbana conference, Skinner proclaimed, "I'm a militant, make no bones about it. Jesus is militant!"[104] For Skinner, Jesus was a revolutionary, an active fighter for justice who did not shy away from radical confrontations with an oppressive political system. Skinner cried out to evangelicals to "get away from this business that to be militant is to be anti-God" and move toward a reinterpretation of Christ as a figure with a deep-seated commitment to justice.[105] This naturally involved using the framework of Black Power to confront how Jesus had been historically constructed to narrowly represent the interests of white America.

Still, Skinner warned that militant attitudes must be appropriately tempered by a supreme commitment to the Lord. He cautioned Christians to understand that militancy and radicalism "must be disciplined and controlled by the Word of God and by the Holy Spirit."[106] For Skinner, the ultimate evangelical commitment was to Christ, not a certain political ideology or social group. This did not mean that Christians could not apply the methods of Black Power to their evangelical convictions. In fact, for many Black Power evangelicals, this was a crucial framework needed to understand Christianity in its biblical form. Rather, Skinner cautioned

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[104] Tom Skinner, "Racism and World Evangelism," 1970, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvKQx4ycTmA.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.

evangelicals not to let militancy lead them astray from their most important obligation to the body of Christ.

The adoption of Black Power ideology among African American evangelicals largely resulted in two different approaches to the fight for racial justice. The first approach, and the focus of this chapter, was separatism. Many black evangelicals in the early 1970s echoed the secular Black Power cries for separate organizations whose sole purpose was to foster a stronger sense of racial identity within the black community. Christian Black Power advocates had come to realize that white evangelical structures and techniques simply did not speak to the black experience. They therefore encouraged black Christians to realize their full humanity by constructing institutions that would transform the white gospel into one that affirmed blackness. Matthew Parker, one of the first African American graduates of the Grand Rapids School of Bible and Music, founded in 1945 by a group of white evangelicals that included Malcolm Cronk, the former pastor of the influential Wheaton Bible Church, cried, "what we need is a black, fundamental, Bible-believing, Bible institute and college that will dehonkify our minds and teach us how to communicate Christ to black people."[107] Parker, who was the first Minority Student Advisor at Wheaton College, along with his peers Ellis, Salley and Behm worked to build separate institutions that would foster the creation of a distinctly black evangelical awareness.

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[107] Billy Graham Center Archives, "Interviews with Matthew Parker - Collection 413," accessed April 16, 2015, http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/413.htm; Orme, "Militant Black Evangelicals," 25.

The National Black Evangelical Association: A Model for Separatism

The inclination towards black separatism was alive and well within the National Black Evangelical Association in the 1970s. An article in *Christianity Today*, the flagship magazine of American evangelicalism, recalls how the NBEA's 1974 Chicago convention "revolved around four themes: an evangelical pan-Africanism, black youth, black unity, and increased involvement in social-action projects."[108] Support of the black community was perhaps the most important goal of the NBEA in the 1970s. Tom Skinner, an active member of the organization at the time, is summarized in *Christianity Today* as stating, "The NBEA, like the black church generally, had never accepted a dichotomy between belief and social action."[109] For black evangelical nationalists, theology translated into direct action in the black community. William H. Bentley stressed that social involvement must function through "black modes" and black methods of community development.[110] He explains, "If we cease to interpret from a black perspective, we might as well cease to exist organizationally."[111] As a result, involvement in and ministry to the black community became a major focus of the organization. Pastor Ruben S. Connor, president of the NBEA in the late 1970s, stressed that his "top priority is evangelism." Connor's vision was, however, "an evangelism that has social implications."[112] For Connor, evangelism in the black community naturally meant

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[108] James S. Tinney, "Black Evangelicals : Expanding the Fold.," *Christianity Today* 19, no. 15 (April 25, 1975): 40–42.
[109] Ibid., 41.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Roger Koskela, "NBEA : When the Bible Bumps Blackness.," *Christianity Today* 21, no. 15 (May 6, 1977): 58–59.

engaging with the social issues of poverty and racism that shaped the spiritual lives of African Americans. Thus, the division between black and white evangelicals only strengthened as the NBEA intentionally distanced itself from the cultural models of white evangelicalism.

A criticism of the social engagement tactics of white evangelicals accompanied the NBEA's focus on the black community. At the NBEA's 1974 convention in Dallas, Texas, participants struggled with how to relate their identities to the larger white evangelical movement. At the convention, John Sailhamer of *Christianity Today* observed "discomfort on the part of some with the very word 'evangelical,'" due to the tradition's tendency to separate social concern and evangelism into distinct categories.[113] In the eyes of black leaders at the NBEA's 1975 convention in New York City, the only intent of white evangelicals was to "preach the Gospel and let the world go to hell."[114] For blacks, white neoevangelical temperament was tainted by a singular focus on winning the hearts and minds of the unconverted as opposed to using evangelism as a means to fight injustice.

In an effort to move away from the pervasive influence of white evangelical theology, the NBEA also critiqued and adapted Cone's black liberation theology on the path towards developing a distinct black evangelical worldview. William H. Bentley, in his essay, "Factors in the Origin and Focus of the National Black Evangelical Association," recalls the NBEA's initial lack of awareness and engagement with black theology. Within white evangelicalism more broadly, "there

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[113] John Sailhamer, "Black Evangelicals : Surviving the Scene.," *Christianity Today* 18, no. 15 (April 26, 1974): 48–49.
[114] Tinney, "Black Evangelicals : Expanding the Fold.," 41.

has been next to nothing done to recognize the existence of Black Theology as a viable contribution, or even a critique to American evangelical theology," Bentley writes.[115] Even within the NBEA itself, Bentley laments, there was little done to address black theology, as many black evangelicals were either unfamiliar with or ultimately rejected the works of James Cone and other liberal black theologians. It was not until the NBEA's third convention in Atlanta in 1969 that the move toward more concrete discussions of theology even surfaced. For Bentley, these theological debates formed the organization's "Declaration of Independence from uncritical dependence upon white evangelical theologians who would attempt to tell us what the content of our efforts at liberation should be."[116] Bentley and others within the NBEA were tired of the ways in which white concerns dominated the American evangelical trajectory. They therefore actively separated themselves from white evangelical organizations in order to promote their own evangelical alternative.

The undertaking of black liberation theology within the NBEA was not without its controversy. In a theology workshop at the NBEA's 1977 convention in San Francisco, California, black evangelical leaders debated whether or not liberation theology had a place within African American evangelicalism. According to *Christianity Today,* Anthony C. Evans, pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, Texas, argued with William Bentley over whether or not to utilize systemic black liberation theology. Evans argued for a strict evangelical adherence to the Bible, even if it meant abandoning a focus on blackness and black interpretation of

[115] William H Bentley, "Factors in the Origin and Focus of the National Black Evangelical Association," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History 1966-1979*, ed. Gayraud Wilmore and James Cone (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 310–25.
[116] Ibid., 314.

the Gospel.[117] For Evans, "If the Bible message and blackness bump heads, blackness must go."[118] While Evans did not totally negate the importance of the black cultural experience, he maintained that it was not the inspired work of God and should therefore not form the entirety of black evangelical theology. In contrast, Bentley's camp argued that the black experience should be used as a major tool in black evangelical theology. At the workshop, Henry Mitchell, the director of the Ecumenical Center for Black Church Studies, affirmed, "Truth is in the book, praise God … but it's true for me 'cause mama told me … What mama told me is more important than what the paper says."[119] Mitchell and Bentley made clear to those in attendance that "there is no totally objective revelation of truth," and that black evangelicals needed to recognize the racism inherent in white scriptural theology, utilizing their own narratives to reconstruct their religious worldviews.[120] Bentley's theology, and the theological framework of the NBEA more broadly, thus "[put] an equal emphasis on both blackness and Christianity."[121] In fact, for Bentley, the reinterpretation of scripture through the lens of the black experience was the only route to true salvation.

For Evans and the more scripturally oriented black evangelicals, such as Ruben S. Connor, the organization's outgoing president, the NBEA's "theology-

[117] Koskela, "NBEA : When the Bible Bumps Blackness," 58.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] John Maust, "The NBEA : Striving to Be Both Black and Biblical.," *Christianity Today* 24, no. 12 (June 27, 1980): 58–59.

culture rift" would prove too alienating.[122] In 1977, Evans, Connor and Eddie B. Lane, the director of the Dallas chapter of the NBEA, resigned in an attempt to highlight their theological qualms with the path the organization was taking.[123] In their letter of resignation, Connor, Evans and Lane argued "that a *biblical*, not a *black* theology, is valid in speaking to the black situation."[124] Their experiences within the NBEA led the three leaders to believe that "too often, history, culture, experience, and sociology, are placed on the same authoritative scale as scripture."[125] Because of this, Connor, Evans and Lane left the organization to pursue a ministry focused mainly on scriptural authority. The NBEA's separatist tactics and experiential theologies were therefore not appealing to all black evangelicals within its ranks. Even so, the organization continued to strengthen its ministry to the black community throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

White Evangelical Reactions

Even though the NBEA employed largely separatist strategies, their vocal criticism of white social engagement got through to some progressive white evangelicals. John Alexander and Jim Wallis, two leaders of the progressive evangelical movement, specifically tackled issues of racial justice. During his time at Wheaton College, a mainstay in evangelical higher education, Alexander critiqued evangelicalism's "individualized social ethic," and encouraged his fellow students to

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[122] Jimmy Locklear, "Theology-Culture Rift Surfaces among Evangelical Blacks.," *Christianity Today* 24, no. 10 (May 23, 1980): 44.
[123] Locklear, "Theology-Culture Rift," 44.
[124] Maust, "The NBEA : Striving to Be Both Black and Biblical," 58.
[125] Ibid.

shift their focus "from personal to corporate responsibility."[126] Alexander prompted his white peers to think about their roles in racist structures and to come to the table with black evangelicals to address the societal and spiritual changes they could bring to their communities. Alexander's publications *Freedom Now* and *The Other Side* worked to include the voices and concerns of black evangelical leaders like Bentley in order to attune white Christians to the realities of race within the evangelical church. Alexander therefore worked to craft a new model of evangelical social engagement, one in which whites used their faith to fight the structural roots of racial oppression.[127]

The efforts of progressive black and white evangelicals culminated in a 1973 workshop in Chicago aimed to unite a coalition of evangelicals committed to righting America's societal injustices. On Thanksgiving of that year, progressive leaders came together to put forth their political platform and "acknowledge our Christian responsibilities of citizenship."[128] They declared, "We deplore the historic involvement of the church in America with racism and the conspicuous responsibility of the evangelical community for perpetuating the personal attitudes and institutional structures that have divided the body of Christ along color lines."[129] At the workshop, Alexander and Wallis, who attended the meetings, took cues from prominent black evangelical leaders, reflecting on how white supremacist

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[126] Swartz, *Moral Minority*, 39.
[127] Gasaway, "Glimmers of Hope."
[128] Evangelicals for Social Action, "Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern," November 1973, http://www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org/about/history/chicago-declaration-of-evangelical-social-concern/.
[129] Ibid.

structures had disproportionately benefitted them as white Christians. Wallis writes, "just to go along with a racist social structure, to accept the economic order as it is, just to do one's job within impersonal institutions is to participate in racism."[130] Thus, some Christians in the late 20th century responded to the black nationalist critiques of white evangelical theology, took these criticisms and used them to reinterpret their own presuppositions of what it meant to be an evangelical.

While Wallis and Alexander facilitated white evangelical reflection on racial issues, their communities largely failed in their efforts to incorporate a number of black evangelicals into their leadership. This was mainly due to the fragmenting forces of identity politics within the diminishing coalition of the evangelical left in the late 20th century.[131] By the mid 1970s, concerns among white evangelicals about wealth inequality and the Vietnam War overshadowed the fight against racism. For black evangelicals, the inability of whites to reach interracial models of leadership only fueled their shift toward separatism.[132] Black Wheaton College student leader Ron Potter expressed black evangelical disillusion with the white evangelical left when he wrote, "New Black Evangelicals have the same distrust for the White Evangelical 'left' as their elders had for neo-evangelicalism twenty-five years ago… The new Blacks feel that White Evangelicals, as a group, no matter how radical or young, will never come to grips with the demon of racism embedded within

[130] Jim Wallis, "White Racism : America's Original Sin," *Sojourners* 16 (November 1, 1987).
[131] Swartz, *Moral Minority,* 189-195.
[132] Ibid., 193.

them."[133] Likewise, William Bentley echoed, "Evangelicalism's treatment of and dedication to the eradication of racism within Christian and other contexts, falls far short of the time, attention, and commitment it invests in other areas of social concern."[134] It was clear to Bentley, Potter and other frustrated black evangelicals that even with the involvement of the progressive left, their concerns as black Christians were not being met within white evangelical structures. As a result, they drifted even further toward separatism as the main solution to the societal sin of racism.

The National Black Christian Students Conference

Perhaps the most radical wing of black evangelical nationalism to come out of this impulse was the National Black Christian Students Conference, the NBEA's youth ministry founded in 1974 to bring black evangelical theology to African American high school and college students.[135] One student active in the early stages of the organization was Walter Arthur McCray, the current President of the National Black Evangelical Association. McCray, who in 1974 graduated with a degree in Biblical Studies and Christian Education from Trinity International University, formerly Trinity Evangelical Divinity School where his predecessors Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm studied, published an impassioned black evangelical call to

[133] Ronald C. Potter, "The New Black Evangelicals," in *Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 305-306.
[134] Bentley, *The NBEA* (Chicago: The National Black Evangelical Association, 1974), 128, quoted in Swartz, *Moral Minority*, 193.
[135] Walter Arthur McCray, "Rev. Dr. Walter Arthur McCray: Biographical Themes," http://revdrmccray.com/.

action titled, *Toward a Holistic Liberation of Black People* (1979).[136] In it, McCray outlines the aims and goals of the organization that called young black Christians "into a definitive individual and corporate commitment to the Black community."[137] McCray's plea for black Christian engagement echoed the concurrent call among secular activists to adhere to a black power ideology, which involved a black focus on the black community.

On an individual level, McCray encouraged students to constantly think about blackness, to critique their existing conceptions of blackness and to affirm their identities as black Christians. For McCray, "Blackness must not be a fad, a style, or just in vogue. It is, and must ever be, apt, relevant and pertinent."[138] In the eyes of the National Black Christian Students Conference, the most important thing black Christians could do was own their blackness. The NBCSC saw race consciousness as a crucial foundation in the fight for black liberation. Student activists involved therefore held it as their theological duty to promote a black awareness to their African American peers.

On a societal scale, the NBCSC encouraged young black Christians to enter the struggle for widespread liberation. This involved a black commitment to the black community in the areas of education, finances, religion, family and culture. According to McCray, the black community needed educational institutions to facilitate racial reflection and the type of consciousness building necessary for

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[136] Ibid.
[137] Walter Arthur McCray, *Toward a Holistic Liberation of Black People: Its Meaning as Expressed in the Objectives of the National Black Christian Students Conference* (NBCSC, 1979) 10.
[138] McCray, *Toward a Holistic Liberation,* 38.

change. McCray writes, "We as Black people must shape our own Black minds. As we educate our children in the right way, we will help our liberation. We must teach each other to think Black and to be Black."[139] This emphasis could only originate from within the black community. It was thus the duty of African Americans to lead this type of indigenous system building outside the influence of white Christianity.

In addition, McCray encouraged students to live in the black community, to engage with it and to financially support black owned businesses and institutions. For McCray, the natural result of this focus was separation. McCray advised students to "consider limiting his/her contacts with others unless those contacts relate, at least peripherally, to the Black community."[140] This also applied in terms of culture, where McCray and others within the NBCSC recommended, "Syncretism and integration must be checked. We must, as best we can, isolate what is our own culture."[141] For black evangelical nationalists, liberation involved a genuine commitment to a fight for justice that originated from and flourished within the black community. Individual race consciousness accompanied a community-oriented vision for systemic change. The NBCSC did not shy away from promoting separate black institutions whose goal was to provide the black community with the tools for liberation.

For the NBCSC, the black revolution was not only individual and communal, but also religious. McCray and his contemporaries held a firm commitment to Christianity as a positive force for liberation. In his theological framework, McCray

[139]Ibid., 39.
[140] Ibid., 29.
[141] Ibid., 35.

made clear "that the black experience must be related to the Bible."[142] His invocation of the Bible reflected a wholly evangelical stance on race relations. For McCray, Jesus Christ was the main figure that would allow blacks to comprehend their suffering in the fight for justice. He reminds black evangelicals that it is a black Christ who "progressively liberates us from negative thoughts about our identity and ourselves as Black people."[143] For McCray and those involved in the organization, Christianity had the power to highlight black worth and humanity in a society that reminded African Americans of their inferiority on a daily basis. Christianity thus laid the foundation for revolution. The struggle for justice was largely spiritual, and McCray and other black Christians possessed the duty to introduce to all members of the black community to the religious nature of liberation. McCray asserts, "We must seek for the salvation of the majority of our people. Numbers of Black people must be saved." Evangelism and ministry to the black community were therefore important aspects in the Christian fight for racial liberation. In the eyes of the NBCSC, the black community could only achieve equality when black Americans learned to interpret the symbols of Christianity in light of their experiences.

Furthermore, members of the NBCSC understood opposition to their movement in largely religious terms. This included white Christians as well as non-Christian blacks, both of whom were under the influence of Satan's worldly grip. McCray further warned black evangelicals of the danger of Satan in their own lives, noting that Satan's goal was to "[cause] confusion about our identity and what we

[142] Ibid., 44
[143] Ibid., 14.

should be as Black people."[144] The NBCSC's goal was therefore to guide black Christians, to help them to build the indigenous communities and structures—both social and religious—needed to achieve ultimate liberation for black Americans.

Conclusion

After a period where black evangelicals struggled to define themselves within American social and religious landscapes, black evangelical leaders in the late 1960s and early 1970s began to construct their religious identities on their own terms. They cultivated a distinct black evangelical worldview that spoke to their experiences as black Americans and Protestants. This worldview grappled with Black Power, black theology and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to fashion a form of black evangelical nationalism that called for a spiritual and social focus on the black community. Through these frameworks, black evangelical leaders reinvented and reasserted their identities as black Christians. Leaders such as Columbus Salley and Carl Ellis pushed for a Christian form of Black Power that centered blackness and interrogated the workings of whiteness within American Protestantism. This black evangelical nationalism called for separate black institutions to educate and heal the black community. Organizations such as the National Black Evangelical Association and the National Black Christian Students Conference did just that—they challenged white evangelical theology and its conception of social engagement. The NBEA and NBCSC applied blackness to theological frameworks that would aid them in the fight for justice and liberation.

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[144] Ibid., 50.

Not all black evangelicals, however, responded to this reinvented consciousness with a separatist vision. Some black evangelical leaders still sought to work within the white evangelical structures in which some were raised and educated. These black leaders, such as prominent evangelists Tom Skinner and John Perkins, began what many scholars call the first wave of racial reconciliation within American evangelicalism. In the next chapter, I will look specifically at these two figures, analyzing their visions for racial reconciliation, a movement that would become central to the American evangelical landscape well into the 21st Century.

CHAPTER 3 THE ROOTS OF RACIAL RECONCILIATION

Tension filled the air at the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's 1970 Urbana Conference as Tom Skinner, one of the event's plenary speakers, boldly declared, "We must become infiltrators, fifth-columnists in Satan's world for the purpose of preaching liberation to an oppressed people."[145] Skinner's message of white evangelical complicity in racial oppression was a message that the audience of over 13,000 evangelicals, mostly white, were not prepared to digest. White audience members sat in their discomfort as Skinner firmly reminded them that during the racial terrors of America's past and present, "the evangelical, Bible-believing, orthodox, conservative church in this country was strangely silent."[146] Skinner criticized evangelicals for maintaining the status quo and failing to see Christ as the radical revolutionary that jumped out of the pages of the New Testament. His impassioned speech called into question the very foundations of the white evangelical establishment, urging all evangelicals to set aside their models of church growth and evangelism in order to join the fight for true liberation.

For the black evangelicals in attendance, Skinner's message was a necessary wake up call to an organization in which they felt increasingly marginalized. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, an evangelical student movement that grew substantially in the United States by the mid-20th century, did not have a solid track record when it came to racial inclusion and awareness. It was not until the organization's 1967 Urbana conference that InterVarsity became attuned to the problem of race within its ranks. At Urbana '67, convention participants drew

[145] Tom Skinner, "Racism and World Evangelism."
[146] Ibid.

attention to the lack of diversity among InterVarsity's leadership, as well as the conference's evasion of racial issues. Dismayed by the movement's inability to speak to the black evangelical experience, African American InterVarsity student leaders knew that something had to change. Thus, in preparation for Urbana '70, black student leaders recruited hundreds of black participants and advocated for the inclusion of black plenary speakers, Skinner included.[147] For Ron Mitchell, a black student active in InterVarsity in the late 1960s, Urbana '70 offered an opportunity to push the organization towards racial equality and inclusion. Mitchell writes, "We felt that not only would God use the convention to speak to us, but God would also use us in some way to speak to the convention."[148] Mitchell and his black evangelical peers knew that in order for InterVarsity to realize its full potential, the organization had to confront its own racial inequality head on.

The fight for racial justice within the existing structures of white evangelicalism is evidence of another way black evangelicals engaged with their environments in the late 20th century. Leaders such as Tom Skinner and John Perkins held it as their social and theological duty to unite evangelicals across racial lines. They echoed the call of Martin Luther King, Jr. in their pleas for reconciliation between black and white. Both Skinner and Perkins held steadfast to King's vision that "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community"—a beloved community that would serve as "the realization of

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[147] David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, 1st ed, Politics and Culture in Modern America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 34.
[148] Ron Mitchell, *Organic Faith: A Call to Authentic Christianity* (Chicago, Ill.: Cornerstone Press Chicago, 1998), 110.

divine love in lived social relation."[149] The beloved community involved confrontation, it involved sacrifice, it involved forgiveness and it involved pain. Most importantly, it involved the coming together of oppressor and oppressed in deep Christian unity. Skinner and Perkins applied their evangelical convictions to this ideal of beloved community. They sought to implement King's vision within the everyday spaces that evangelicals—white and black—occupied.

In this chapter, I will examine the emergence of the first wave of racial reconciliation theology in the late 1970s by analyzing the work of two prominent black evangelical leaders, Tom Skinner and John Perkins. First, I will introduce Skinner, whose evangelistic crusades and models for racial reconciliation made him one of the most well known black evangelical leaders of the late 20th century. Next, I will examine John Perkins's contribution to the push for racial reconciliation among black evangelicals in the 1970s and 1980s. In doing so, I aim to show how advocates for racial reconciliation viewed separatism from white evangelicalism as only part of the solution to the larger problem of evangelical race relations. Instead, for Skinner and Perkins, critical engagement with white evangelical structures provided a more Holy path to racial justice.

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[149] Martin Luther King, "'Facing the Challenge of a New Age,' Address Delivered at the First Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change," in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume III: Birth of a New Age, December 1955-December 1956*, ed. Clayborne Carson et al. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), 458; Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005) 2.

Tom Skinner

Tom Skinner is regarded by many as one of the most influential black evangelical leaders of the 20th and 21st centuries. Born in Harlem in 1942 to a Baptist minister, Skinner was introduced to Christianity at an early age. In his adolescent years, Skinner's relationship to his faith was characterized by distrust and resentment. As a teen, Skinner questioned how a just God could allow the grotesque living conditions of the Harlem ghetto to persist. In his autobiography, *Black and Free*, Skinner describes in great detail the horrors of growing up black in inner city America. He recounts the screams of the mothers whose newborn children were eaten by rats in the middle of the night, the slumlords who sucked money out of helpless tenets and the gang violence that plagued the streets on a daily basis. Skinner recalls, "I couldn't, for the life of me, see how God, if He cared for humanity at all, could allow the conditions that existed in Harlem."[150] The supposed comforts of the black church further alienated Skinner from his family and his religion. For Skinner, the historic black church tradition was empty and meaningless—its "traditions, clichés and dullness only drove [Skinner] further away from God."[151] As a result, Skinner turned to gangs and violence to express power over an unjust American system. Skinner lived a double life, one where he participated in gang leadership during the week and went to church to please his family on the weekends.[152]

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[150] Tom Skinner, *Black and Free* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1968), 29.
[151] Skinner, *Black and Free*, 51.
[152] Ibid.

It was not until Skinner's formative conversion experience that he began to engage with a different kind of Christianity. In the midst of planning one of the largest gang fights in New York history, Skinner tuned in to the radio expecting to hear his favorite DJ. Instead, he happened upon an unplanned radio gospel hour that would forever change the way he thought about faith. The radio speaker showed him "that Tom Skinner, with his bigotry, hate and violence, could never—through his own strength and energy—be able to produce anything in life that would be worthwhile."[153] From that night on, Skinner needed Christ in order to make the world true and just. The Jesus Skinner encountered during this hour was not the empty Jesus of the black church or the stuffy Jesus of the white Christianity. Rather, it was a Christ who spoke directly to Skinner's experiences in the Harlem ghetto. It was the Jesus as described in the New Testament, one who showed solidarity with those most oppressed by Roman society, one whose death stood for the love and salvation of all humanity and one who embodied true justice. Through this Jesus, Skinner "became convinced that the only answer to the prejudice, the bigotry, and the hate that exists in our world today is that people allow the love of God through the Person of Jesus Christ to be expressed through them."[154] For Skinner, meeting this Jesus was a turning point. From then on, Skinner left his gang lifestyle and devoted his life and work solely to the ministry of Christ.

As a young minister, Skinner focused on reaching out to the community in which he grew up, encouraging Christians to establish personal relationships with Jesus. For Skinner, this oftentimes forced him to compete directly with the

[153] Ibid., 68
[154] Ibid.,75

established black churches of his youth. Skinner recalls how his ministry "de-emphasized church membership and emphasized a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The pastors interpreted this as rebellion against the established order of the church and accused me of trying to overthrow church authority and get the young people to leave the church."[155] Skinner's evangelical message, which stressed personal spiritual autonomy over traditional structures, effectively caught black church leaders off guard. Skinner's style was appealing, and he therefore posed a threat to the religious institutions that he himself viewed as meaningless and backwards. In 1962, Skinner's organization, the Harlem Evangelistic Association, began its first major crusade to win the hearts and minds of black Christians to the evangelical faith. Despite organizational setbacks and resistance from both black and white evangelical and liberal Protestant communities, Skinner and his associates were largely successful. The crusade at the Apollo Theater in Harlem attracted thousands who came to hear Skinner deliver sermons that introduced them to Christ in a personal and meaningful way.[156]

While Skinner knew he would have a difficult time winning the support of Harlem's black church leadership, his early ministry also exposed him to the harsh realities of white evangelicalism. When Skinner reached out to more established white evangelical congregations, he was met with cold resistance. Skinner recalls how he "became aware of how so many white evangelicals are willing to say the Negro community needs Christ and needs the preaching of the Gospel, but when it comes to action, they are not willing to join forces with brave and uncompromising

[155] Ibid., 82
[156] Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues,* 59.

Negro evangelicals who make the Gospel of Christ relevant in such a community."[157] While they supported his initiatives, few white evangelicals joined Skinner's early ministry. Instead, they remained in the comfort of their suburban churches, largely segregated and committed to their status quo Bible message. Even without the support of white evangelicals, the Harlem Evangelistic Association reached thousands within its first few crusades, and the roots were set for a larger evangelistic movement to blossom.[158]

But what exactly was Skinner's message and why was it so unique? It is important to remember that Skinner's conception of social and racial issues was largely theological. Skinner held that all of the world's problems derived from Satan's worldly influence. In his speech at Urbana '70, Skinner reminded the audience that "the difficulty for us to understand as Christians is who really runs this world, in whose hands the world really belongs."[159] For Skinner, Satan was the root of all of society's injustice. It was the devil who created oppressive worldly systems and who inhibited the whole of society from realizing Christ's radical vision. Skinner quoted the Apostle Paul, urging evangelicals to realize that what they fight against is not "flesh and blood" but "spiritual wickedness in high places."[160] Thus, while Skinner saw the concrete problems of American race relations, he argued that these problems were not solely structural. Rather, they were the result of a society that was not fully connected to God. For Skinner, all forms of societal oppression were sinful and inherently demonic.

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[157] Skinner, *Black and Free,* 98.
[158] Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues,* 59.
[159] Tom Skinner, "Racism and World Evangelism."
[160] Ibid.

This is not to say that Skinner's message avoided the structural dynamics of racism in the United States. To the contrary, Skinner's evangelicalism naturally combined theological inquiry with the critique of social structures. Skinner highlighted many systemic aspects of racism and their effects on mainstream understandings of history. In his speech at Urbana '70, Skinner emphasized how important it is for Christians to understand the historical trajectory of American racism, and think critically about racism's connection to politics and economics. Skinner invoked the history of slavery, detailing how it systemically benefitted whites economically, politically and spiritually. He recalled the histories of Jim Crow segregation, World War II era white flight and the Great Migration, making it remarkably clear that his vision employed a critical framework that combined theological, spiritual and structural concerns. In an article in Sojourners Magazine in 1972, Skinner highlighted the racial power dynamics of American society, noting how "white society still runs the black community even though black people live in the community."[161] Thus, Skinner recognized how inherently sinful structures helped create the marginalized experiences of many black Americans.

As a result, Skinner's solution to Christian race relations was twofold. First and foremost, the problem could only be answered through Christianity. In his 1970 book, *How Black is the Gospel?*, Skinner asserts, "In the midst of America's racial crisis, Christianity in its pure and true form alone can make the difference."[162] It was only Christians who could "speak to the system in the name of Jesus," and it was specifically evangelicals, because of their true and biblical faith, that were most fit to

[161] Tom Skinner, "Black Power," *The Other Side* 8, no. 1 (February 1972), 8.
[162] Skinner, *How Black is the Gospel?*, 15.

do so.[163] According to Skinner, reliance on scripture and personal relationships with God equipped evangelicals, more so than other Christians, to right America's spiritual and racial imbalances. For Skinner, black evangelicals in particular were armed with the best cultural and religious tools to lead the fight for a racially reconciled evangelical community. "The black man, who has made noteworthy contributions to American life and culture in spite of oppression, is in an ideal position to lead a spiritual crusade," Skinner writes.[164] This crusade involved coming together as Christians across racial lines. It involved white evangelicals giving up power and seeking forgiveness for their conscious and unconscious contributions to racialized systems. Skinner's crusade also called upon all evangelicals to understand the difference between individual prejudice and institutional racism and address both in pursuing reconciliation. Throughout these processes, it was of utmost importance to Skinner that evangelicals not lose sight of God's word.

While part of Skinner's vision addressed systemic injustices, his reconciliation theology relied mainly on individual spiritual transformation. According to Skinner, Christians could fight against systems, they could change institutions, but if the core of believers remained the same, they would not achieve full equality. Skinner asserts, "The answer to bigotry, hate and prejudice rests in a transformation of the individual through Jesus Christ."[165] Christians could only correct institutions and behavior inasmuch as they submitted to Jesus Christ.

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[163] Ibid., 100
[164] Ibid., 16
[165] Ibid., 15

Skinner's evangelistic crusades therefore sought to "transform the very structure of a man" by introducing him to the pure Gospel message, a message that was, for Skinner, more personal than the Gospel of the historic black church and had a better sense of justice than the Gospel of white evangelicalism.[166] Understanding Christ on a more radical and personal level was the only way Christians could overcome the sins of this world and unite as a beloved community.

It is important to note here that Skinner's evangelistic tactics were grounded in a distinct eschatology, or end-times theology. As a result, his conception of evangelical race relations was largely structured around how Christians could prepare for God's coming Kingdom. This led Skinner to regard human structures as inherently sinful and in need of transcendence. Skinner declares, "The whole premise of the scripture is that the human order is archaic, impractical, it is no good. It is infected with demonic power … and the whole purpose of Christ coming into the world is to overthrow the demonic human system and to establish his own Kingdom in the hearts of men."[167] Preparing Christian hearts for Christ's eternal love was therefore one of Skinner's main goals. The worldly order, as he saw it, was an unfit host for Christ's Second Coming, and he saw as his divinely ordained mission to introduce evangelicals to the full Gospel of the Lord.

Skinner's eschatological leanings contributed to his theology of racial reconciliation. Because his main focus was on realizing God's vision on earth, Skinner held firm to the scriptural prophecy of Christian unity. For Skinner and

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[166] Ibid., 106
[167] Tom Skinner, "Racism and World Evangelism."

other early advocates of reconciliation theology, Christ stood as the ultimate example of harmony among Christians. As stated in Ephesians 2:14-16, Christ "is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with his commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross."[168] The role of Christians was therefore to realize God's vision, seeking unity both with God and with fellow believers. The only way to do this was for Christians to recognize racial differences, to address systemic and individual power dynamics in order to forgive one another and come together as one. Skinner holds that "the white man needs to swallow his pride and seek forgiveness for racist attitudes that have brought on the present crisis in America. The black man then must forgive in a true demonstration of Christian love."[169] Once this process was complete, Christians could enter into God's reconciled community. For Skinner, "The final solution is in His hands, and His hands are neither white nor black."[170] The preparation of God's Kingdom therefore relied on the realization of Christian scriptural unity across racial lines.

Throughout the late 20th century, Skinner brought his theology of evangelical unity and reconciliation to evangelical circles through speaking tours and evangelistic crusades. In 1970, Skinner rebranded his ministry and established Tom

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[168] "Ephesians 2:14-16 NRSV." Accessed April 27, 2015. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=ephesians+2%3A14-16&version=NRSV.
[169] Skinner, *How Black is the Gospel*, 15.
[170] Ibid., 16.

Skinner Associates, Inc., which expanded to include church consulting services, college ministries, and leadership programs on top of his already popular evangelistic crusades.[171] By the early 1970s, Skinner had made a name for himself within the larger evangelical world. His radio ministry, established in 1964, reached an audience of over one million Christians.[172] His public campaigns touched thousands of evangelicals, both black and white. According to Richard Parker, TSA's crusade director in the early 1970s, "the racial make-up of the attendance [of Skinner's crusades] was about 60 percent white and 40 percent black."[173] Even with many whites in the audience, Skinner never shied away from his hard-hitting theological critiques of the American system. He gave compelling sermons such as "The White Man Did It" and "A White Man's Religion," a message that opened the eyes of many whites in attendance to their complicity within racist structures and their Christian duty to reconcile that behavior.[174]

Some white evangelicals found Skinner's message unpalatable. According to a 1971 article in *The Other Side,* Moody Bible Institute removed Skinner's radio program from their airwaves for being "too political."[175] As Moody's white station manager Bob Neff explained, "Our policy is to try to stay away from political issues as much as possible."[176] The mission of WMBI was not to promote a political

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[171] "HISTORY - Skinner Leadership Institute," accessed April 27, 2015, http://skinnerleadership.org/about/history/.
[172] "Tom Skinner Too Radical for WMBI." The Other Side 7, no. 3 (Summer 1971): 32–33.
[173] Edward Gilbreath, "A Prophet Out of Harlem," *Christianity Today*, September 16, 1996, 39.
[174] Ibid.
[175] *The Other Side*, "Tom Skinner Too Radical."
[176] Ibid.

ideology, but "to proclaim the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ as the answer to man's problems."[177] Moody's white leadership felt that Skinner's message in the preceding months had crossed the line between the gospel and politics and violated the station's policy that "any references to controversial social topics must be made 'without bias.'"[178] Skinner defended himself, arguing that his message was no different or more political than it had been in the past. He lamented, "In a time when some of us are risking our lives to communicate Jesus Christ, the people who should be our brothers misunderstand us the most."[179] The Moody incident conflicted with Skinner's notion that the true gospel had natural political implications to address racial injustice. It became clear to him that these implications were simply not a part of evangelical theology for some white Christians.

Even though Skinner's theology was sometimes hard for white Christians to digest, he remained committed to reconciliation as the only solution to society's sins. Apart from his early involvement in the NBEA, Skinner largely critiqued separatism as a theological model. While he approved of the humanity-asserting emphasis of Black Power thought, Skinner compared the antiestablishment techniques of Black Power activists to the biblical character Barabbas. For Skinner, Barabbas, a Jewish radical who fought against the Roman Empire, symbolized the separatist movement—he fought outside the Roman system to tear it down, ravaging and pillaging Roman villages on his way. Jesus' radical activism took a different approach. In *How Black is the Gospel?*, Skinner writes, "So Jesus would have

[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid.

said to Barabbas, Barabbas, you're right, the Roman system stinks. It's corrupt to the core. But you are going to tear it down with your own corrupt nature; and in the name of getting rid of corruption, you are being corrupt, and you are going to replace the Roman system with our own messed-up kind of system."[180] Barabbas, just like the Black Power radicals of Skinner's day, did not have the courage to confront the establishment using Christ as their model. They did not recognize their inherently corrupt natures and failed to submit entirely to Christ. Skinner's commitment to Jesus as a radical revolutionary led him to believe that "it is only at the cross of Jesus Christ, it is only through Jesus Christ, that the Stokely Carmichaels, the Eldridge Cleavers and the Rap Browns can hold hands with the Whitney Youngs and the Roy Wilkinses."[181] Skinner's framework transcended political allegiances and separatist methods. His ultimate commitment was to Christ and Christ alone.

John Perkins

Skinner was not alone in his efforts to introduce evangelical communities to reconciliation theology. Another pioneer in the evangelical world was John Perkins. Born in 1930 to a southern sharecropper family in New Hebron, Mississippi, Perkins' mother died shortly after his birth, leaving his grandparents to raise him. Growing up, Perkins experienced the extreme segregation and poverty of the Jim Crow South. He fled Mississippi when he was 17 after a brutal encounter with the police in which his brother was killed. Perkins moved to California and vowed never to return south. After his formative conversion experience in 1957, however,

[180] Skinner, *How Black is the Gospel?*, 95-96.
[181] Ibid., 97.

Perkins felt called by Christ to go back to his home state and preach the Gospel to all who would hear. In 1960, Perkins and his wife Vera Mae returned to Mississippi to live out their divine call.[182]

At first, the Perkinses ministry focused mainly on evangelism. He and Vera Mae taught Bible lessons to children in local schools and they offered tent meetings where all community members could enroll in Bible classes and hear Perkins preach.[183] It became clear to Perkins early on, however, that a singular focus on evangelism was not representative of the full gospel message. Perkins sensed that the people of Mendenhall, Mississippi needed the "visible truth" of Christ in order for real spiritual change to occur.[184] To address this, Perkins founded Voice of Cavalry in 1965, a ministry organization that combined evangelism with social engagement and community development.[185] Perkins' "Three R's of Christian Community Development" undergirded Voice of Cavalry's mission.[186] For him, the principles of "Relocation, Reconciliation and Redistribution" perfectly captured the holistic essence of the Gospel, which he wanted to see realized in the everyday lives of evangelicals.[187] Perkins held firm to the belief that "how we relate our resources (and for Christians how we relate our faith) to the needs of human beings around us

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[182] John Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down: John Perkins Tells His Own Story* (Glendale: G/L Publication, 1976).
[183] Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down,* 93.
[184] Ibid.
[185] "Papers of John Perkins - Collection 367," accessed April 27, 2015, http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/367.htm#3.
[186] John M. Perkins, "With Justice for All," *Fundamentalist Journal* 7, no. 2 (February 1, 1988), 16.
[187] Ibid.

is the issue by which Jesus will judge us and our country."[188] The fight for social, political and economic justice held salvific importance for Perkins. Community engagement was therefore an essential byproduct of his biblical theology—the two could not be separated.

With this vision, Voice of Cavalry grew to be a staple of community growth in Mendenhall and the surrounding areas. Perkins' ministry addressed the real, physical needs of poor blacks subjugated by a brutal economic and political caste system. In the mid 1960s, Perkins joined other civil rights activists in the fight to register black voters and integrate Mississippi public schools.[189] Voice of Cavalry itself became substantially involved in the economic development of the black community in Mendenhall. In 1967, Perkins, his colleagues and dedicated VOC volunteers established the Federation of Southern Co-ops, an economic cooperative unit that provided housing and funded "indigenous organizations and communities whose life substance feeds on local efforts, local training and local leadership."[190] Perkins never lost sight of his goal to use his ministry and resources to empower local residents to create an "indigenous community vitality" of their own.[191] By the 1970s, Voice of Cavalry had built a massive institutional network that included a church, a Bible Institute, a health center, a gymnasium and several job training and leadership development programs.[192]

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[188] John Perkins, "Bicentennial in the Other America : A Black Christian Celebrates the Church," *Sojourners* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 1976), 23.
[189] Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 116-118.
[190] Ibid., 127
[191] Ibid., 126
[192] Ibid.

While many of Perkins' strategies were economic, everything he did was couched in a firm biblical theology. Perkins' vision was religious. For him, the inherently sinful nature of human beings was the root cause of all forms of societal oppression, and the gospel was the only way to solve humanity's "spiritual bankruptcy."[193] Perkins' community programs were therefore infused with evangelism. He writes, "Evangelism creates the committed people, the concern for the needs of people and the broad community base from which to launch social action. Social action, in turn, fleshes out the Lordship of Christ, reaching people's spiritual needs through their felt needs and developing an indigenous economic base for the work."[194] Spiritual and social well-being were thus interdependent. Spiritual vitality thrived if the needs of the community were met, and the needs of the community could only be met by using Christ-like tactics. The pages of Perkins' autobiography, *Let Justice Roll Down*, are filled with the scriptural passages that influence his work. He takes his philosophy of corporate responsibility from the cooperative Jewish communities of the Old Testament and his model for Christian love from the parable of the Good Samaritan, to name a few.[195] Perkins' commitment to the Bible was deep-seated and social action was the natural manifestation of this worldview.

According to Perkins, white evangelicals had fallen dangerously short in terms of social action. He claimed that American Christians "are moving through the

[193] Ibid., 106
[194] Ibid., 222
[195] Ibid., 210.

world too fast with a gospel that is too easy."[196] The white evangelical church, in his opinion, had not yet begun to grasp the holistic gospel. He condemned whites for their failure "to take creative responsibility for the moral decay and urgent problems we all face."[197] Of deepest regret for Perkins was the lack of white evangelical involvement in the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s. Perkins expressed "sadness at seeing those that I knew as brothers in Christ insist on a Sunday religion that didn't sharpen their sense of justice during those years of turmoil."[198] In the case of white evangelical involvement, "It wasn't a question of what 'team' to join. In terms of social justice, *evangelicals just didn't have a team on the field*."[199] Perkins' comprehensive gospel was justice-minded and white Christians, in his opinion, were just not responding to the same call.

Here, it becomes useful to outline just how white evangelicals were engaging socially and politically in the late 20th century. As I have already established, some white evangelicals such as John Alexander and Jim Wallis fought for a progressive evangelical coalition that critiqued structures of oppression and applied a justice framework to Christianity. However, with the fragmentation of their leftist coalition in the 1970s, conservative Christian leaders capitalized on a subculture that was aching for another avenue of political engagement. Charismatic leaders like Jerry Falwell, a leading televangelist, political activist and founder of Liberty University, a Christian Bible college in Lynchburg, Virginia, formed a comprehensive political

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[196] John Perkins, "Reconciled Community in a World at War," *Sojourners* 6 (July 1, 1977), 22.
[197] John Perkins, "A Vision for Service," *Other Side* 21, no. 7 (October 1, 1985): 35.
[198] Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 111.
[199] Ibid.

platform committed to upholding the Christian fabric of the American nation. Founded in 1979, Falwell's Moral Majority became the face of conservative politics, championing a largely pro-family, anti-homosexual, anti-abortion and anti-government agenda. Falwell, along with other conservative activists such as Paul Weyrich and Howard Phillips, mobilized a majority white evangelical voting bloc that would propel Ronald Reagan to victory in the 1980 election.[200]

On the whole, the Christian Right largely evaded the issue of American racism. White evangelical leaders like Falwell maintained segregationist viewpoints until the political climate of the Civil Rights movement forced them to publicly condemn prejudice between individual Christians as ungodly.[201] Still, fundamentalist and mainstream white evangelical understandings of racism remained in the realm of the interpersonal—few conservative Christians offered structural critiques of racist systems.[202] Even so, it is important to note the crucial role that race played in the mobilization of the Religious Right. While many scholars attribute the rise of the Christian Right to the confrontation of social issues such as abortion and family values, leading scholar of American evangelicalism Randall Balmer points to race as the main mobilizing factor for Falwell's Moral Majority. Balmer names the 1983 Supreme Court case, *Bob Jones University v. United States*, as the primary catalyst for the politicization of the Religious Right.[203] In *Bob Jones*

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[200] Matthew Avery Sutton, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right: A Brief History with Documents*, First Edition edition (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 22, 23.
[201] Ibid.
[202] Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 46-49.
[203] Randall Balmer. "The Real Origins of the Religious Right." POLITICO Magazine. Accessed October 7, 2014.

University v. United States, the Supreme Court upheld the Internal Revenue Service's revocation of Bob Jones University's tax-exempt status on the basis that the university's refusal to allow interracial marriage violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964.[204] Beginning in the early 1970s, Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist Bible School in Greenville, South Carolina, fought a decade-long battle in the courts to retain their tax-exempt privileges. For the university and a number of white evangelical supporters, the court case was not about race, but about the freedom of religion and separation of church and state. In an amicus curiae brief submitted to the Court, the National Association of Evangelicals held that the Court's decision "erroneously applies a public policy intended to rid this nation of invidious racial discrimination to a University which admits blacks, but follows a policy with respect to interracial dating and marriage based not on personal bias or prejudice, but sincere religious belief."[205] For supporters of Bob Jones, the court case was an unnecessary infringement on the religious freedom guaranteed to them by the Constitution. According to Balmer, conservative evangelical leaders therefore used this sentiment to unite conservative Christians around an anti-government platform that grew to include the family oriented social issues in the mid 1980s.[206] Mobilized by *Bob Jones* and other social factors, the initiatives of conservative evangelicals in the late 20th century largely contributed to the growth of the Christian Right.

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http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/religious-right-real-origins-107133.html.

[204] Joseph Crespino, "Civil Rights and the Relgious Right," in *Rightward Bound: Making American Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 95-95.
[205] Sutton, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right*, 62.
[206] Balmer, "The Real Origins."

Many black evangelicals, Perkins especially, criticized these strengthening political ties between white evangelicals and the political right. When asked about his views on the Moral Majority in an interview in *Christianity Today*, Perkins responded, "They have reduced loving Jesus down to nothing. They don't have a definition of truth that is deep enough."[207] Like the white evangelicals before them who had failed to enter the struggle for Civil Rights, the emerging Christian Right in no way upheld Perkins' community-oriented gospel. In addition, the Moral Minority was not dedicated to Perkins' vision of working across racial lines. According to Perkins, leaders of the Moral Majority "will leave it to blacks totally to deliver themselves. They will provide some resources for blacks to do the work for them."[208] Even so, the models of white fundamentalism could never reach true reconciliation because they only relied on surface level engagement with the black community. In short, white Christians were "not interested in anything that would be a challenge to the status quo."[209] Total reconciliation could only come when both communities, black and white, committed to unity on a deeper level—committed to understanding how their actions and worldviews contributed to larger systems. Conservative white evangelicalism, for Perkins, was not focused on this type of evangelical understanding.

While Perkins openly criticized white evangelicals, his main goal was to unite black and white Christians across racial lines. The reasons for this are twofold. First

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[207] John Perkins, "An Interview with John Perkins, the Prophet : (Christians) Have Stopped Short of Being the Incarnated Life of God," *Christianity Today* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 1982), 21.
[208] Ibid.
[209] Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 109.

and foremost, the Bible gave Perkins a clear mandate for reconciliation. A central theme of the New Testament is unity among believers in the body of Christ. Colossians 3:11, Ephesians 2:11-22 and Galatians 3:28 all mention that in God "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."[210] Perkins took these scriptural messages to heart, using them to guide his fight for Christian racial justice. Second, reconciliation was a necessary first step in relating the holistic gospel message. According to Perkins, "as a reconciled group, we can be more effective in society because we will know what goes into reconciliation, and our commitment will have to be to Jesus instead of race."[211] For Perkins, reconciliation would enable Christians to submit their ultimate allegiances to Christ and realize the full gospel message.

It was important to Perkins that black and white Christians be involved in reconciliation in order for both groups to better reflect the image of God. One group could not reconcile without the other. It was therefore the duty of all Christians to "see themselves as God's tools and the church as his workshop for reconciliation."[212] Perkins was very aware of the fact that this process would not come easy. True reconciliation naturally involved suffering. Just as the Apostle Paul fought to bring Christians together across ancient cultural lines, so too must modern Christians face

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[210] David K. Ryden, "Evangelicals and the Elusive Goal of Racial Reconciliation: The Role of Culture, Politics, and Public Policy," in *Is the Good Book Good Enough? Evangelical Perspectives on Public Policy* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011), 206-207; "Galatians 3:28 NRSV," accessed April 27, 2015, https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians%203:28.
[211] John Perkins, "An Interview with John Perkins, the Prophet : (Christians) Have Stopped Short of Being the Incarnated Life of God," *Christianity Today* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 1982), 21.
[212] John Perkins, "Hope and Cost of Reconciliation," *Sojourners* 6 (May 1, 1977), 15.

the hardships of uniting as one body. In working with both black and white Christian communities, Perkins saw the "impossible brokenness" that resulted from systems of racism and poverty.[213] He ultimately held that in order to heal the wounds of systemic injustice, "somebody will have to bear some stripes" and "lay our bodies down."[214] For Perkins, helping Christians realize that they were tools for a greater divine purpose was the first step in creating a reconciled community. He wanted Christians to believe that the Word of God could live through them and that they could join the fight against injustice in order to change their communities here on earth.

Perkins was no stranger to the suffering that came with reaching out across racial lines. From the start, Voice of Cavalry worked hard to bring white Christians into its fold. In a 1987 interview, Perkins describes the involvement of white pastor Phil Reed, an active member of VOC from its inception. Perkins recalls, "In those early days, there would develop in the church, these tensions between Phil being a white … and the ministry being pro-black."[215] Even so, VOC leadership worked through these issues, with reconciliation as its guiding factor. By embodying the principles of reconciliation within its own management structure, Voice of Cavalry served as an example of Christian unity to the wider community. In the 1970s, Perkins saw this vision lacking in Mendenhall. While VOC managed to involve a number of white Christians in its plan for community development, the surrounding areas remained starkly segregated. To remedy this, Perkins launched the program

[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.
[215] "Collection 367 - John M. Perkins. T2 Transcript," accessed April 27, 2015, http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/trans/367t02.htm.

"Freedom Summer 1971," with the goal of crafting "the spiritual complement" to the 1964 Freedom Summer civil rights campaign.[216] Freedom Summer 1971 was to serve as "a three-month period of intensified community building" that would, in hope, "enlarge the interracial cast of [Perkins'] Christian movement."[217] Perkins recruited two dissimilar groups of volunteers for his program. The first was a crowd of white fundamentalist students from a congregation in California, the second, a group of militant black student organizers from the University of Michigan.[218] The event, which Perkins had hoped would bring two polarized communities together in order to "dramatize the miracle of faith-based reconciliation," turned out to be a complete failure.[219] The group of white students, armed with their Bibles and ready to save souls, hardly engaged on issues of race and social justice. The black students, firmly committed to separatism, spent the majority of their time organizing with local Black Power activists and ultimately ended in a gun battle with the FBI and local police.[220] Overall, the event awoke Perkins to the hardships of true reconciliation. Reflecting on the failure, Perkins wrote, "Here were the fragments of what we believed in coming together—the preaching of the gospel, the social action that met people's needs, blacks and whites working together. But they were coming together without any mediation … The poles were just too far apart."[221] Determined not to give up, Perkins redoubled his efforts on the "three R's" with a firm

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[216] Marsh, *Beloved Community*, 177.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid.
[221] John Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution: The Christian Response to Human Need, a Strategy for Today* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1976) 167.

commitment to Christian relocation in hopes that if blacks and whites lived together in the same communities, Freedom Summer 1971 would not repeat itself.

For Perkins, relocation formed the foundation for racial reconciliation and Christian community development. In an article in *Sojourners Magazine* in 1977, Perkins writes that if Christians "relocate ourselves—individually and corporately—we will be a challenge to society."[222] If black and white Christians live together in the same communities and come to truly understand one another, Christians "will be fighting all of those hidden conflicts of racism, hatred, class, struggle, envy, greed, and cultural prejudice that have fueled all world conflicts in the past."[223] It was therefore the duty of the church to facilitate relocation and the duty of individual evangelicals to act upon their divine call to enter into interracial Christian communities. To act on this, Voice of Cavalry invited groups of white and black Christians to pool their resources and form a unified community in Jackson, Mississippi.[224] Taking his cue from other white evangelical leftists who were simultaneously embracing the idea of intentional Christian communities, Perkins had a vision for a fully interracial way of life.[225] Some evangelicals undertook Perkins' initiative—the community attracted a fair number of Midwestern, white Mennonites and Quakers in its early years.[226] Through Perkins' economic development programs, these relocated white Christians worked largely under local black leadership to establish a flourishing community in Jackson. By the late 1970s,

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[222] Perkins, "Reconciled Community in a World at War," 39.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Marsh, *Beloved Community,* 179.
[225] Swartz, *Moral Minority*, 89.
[226] Marsh, *Beloved Community* 179.

it was clear that Voice of Cavalry "was the only interracial show in town."[227] While not without its difficulties, the community in Jackson proved that Christians could establish "a voluntary new corporate identity with each other."[228] Perkins' strategy of relocation was not a surface level attempt to bring communities together across racial lines—it involved a fundamental change to the way black and white Christians understood and related to one another.

Conclusion

While some black evangelicals responded to their renewed consciousness with separatist organizations and nationalist pleas, others pushed for social change within the existing structures of white evangelicalism. Leaders such as Tom Skinner and John Perkins, who both fought for racial reconciliation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, provide the clearest examples of this alternative approach. Tom Skinner and John Perkins used their theological vision of reconciliation to engage black and white evangelicals in the quest for Christian unity and social justice. Skinner's evangelistic crusades promoted both individual spiritual transformation as well as systemic change in order to cure America's social and racial ills. Skinner saw the potential of evangelicalism to fix oppressive institutions so as to loosen Satan's grip on the world and establish God's just Kingdom. This involved Christians coming together across racial lines and realizing the unity of a true apostolic community. Perkins also championed a message of Christian unity. His theology of

[227] Ibid.
[228] Perkins, "Hope and Cost of Reconciliation," 15.

racial reconciliation involved both an individual and corporate Christian commitment to coming together as one body in Christ. Perkins' philosophy stressed community engagement and Christian leadership development in order to reach a deeper connection between evangelicals of all races. Even though Skinner and Perkins preferred to operate within white evangelicalism, their efforts were not without criticism of the very structures in which they found themselves. Skinner and Perkins alike pushed back against the white evangelical church's conception of race relations. They challenged all evangelicals to think critically about American structures, and were not afraid to challenge white evangelical leadership in the process. Skinner and Perkins pushed white communities to see how the pursuit of racial justice was a necessary byproduct of their evangelical faith. Social engagement was the key to Skinner and Perkins' gospel, and they did all they could to bring this message to evangelicals, both black and white.

Skinner and Perkins's influence spawned generations of Christian leaders committed to realizing true reconciliation within the evangelical church. Their messages were a necessary wake up call to white evangelical structures that remained ignorant to the effects societal racism had on their tradition. While Skinner experienced a series of personal and organizational setbacks in the 1980s, he revived his reconciliation ministry in 1993 with the founding Mission Mississippi in Jackson, just before his untimely death in 1994.[229] Together with white evangelical co-founder Patrick Morely, Mission Mississippi to this day aims "to be the leading resource and catalyst for Christian racial reconciliation and healing for

[229] Gilbreath, "A Prophet Out of Harlem."

Mississippi and the world."[230] Likewise, in 1983, Perkins and his wife Vera Mae founded the John M. Perkins Foundation for Reconciliation & Development.[231] Perkins's late son Spencer Perkins was also inspired by his father to lead the charge for racial reconciliation. Spencer Perkins and his white evangelical colleague Chris Rice co-founded Reconcilers Fellowship in the 1990s, which published the influential *Reconcilers* magazine until the fellowship closed following Spencer Perkins's early death in 1998. The pair co-authored the book *More Than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel* in 1993 to aid evangelicals in their quest for reconciliation.[232] John Perkins continues to be an active leader in the evangelical community and his legacy has touched evangelicals across the United States.

While it took some white evangelicals almost twenty years to respond to Skinner's Urbana '70 critiques, his speech still resonates among evangelicals today. The 1980s and 1990s saw the eruption of racial reconciliation ministries and literature across the evangelical landscape. *Christianity Today* began devoting more attention to issues of race, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship embraced reconciliation theology and black and white evangelicals across the country teamed up to found reconciliation ministries such as Promise Keepers, a Colorado based men's ministry committed to racial unity in Christ. Even prominent evangelical

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[230] "Vision | Mission Mississippi," accessed April 27, 2015, http://missionmississippi.net/about-us/vision-plan/.http://missionmississippi.net/about-us/vision-plan/

[231] "Our History," accessed April 27, 2015, http://spencerperkinscenter.org/v1/about/our-history.

[232] "Chris Rice," ChristianityToday.com, November 1, 2002, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/novemberweb-only/11-11-23.0.html.

figures like Billy Graham adopted the reconciliation message.[233] Whether or not these efforts are succeeding in creating truly interracial evangelical communities has yet to be determined. As Emerson and Smith suggest, white evangelicals still face challenges in terms of thinking about how their theological conceptions of racism are influenced by their whiteness. Still Skinner, Perkins and other advocates for racial reconciliation inspired a vibrant and much needed evangelical conversation about race that persists to this day.

[233] Wadsworth, *Ambivalent Miracles*, 96.

CONCLUSION

Black evangelicals in the late 20th century had a problem with their faith. The evangelicalism they experienced in white congregations and white seminaries did not represent them. Its ideals of social engagement and biblical authority were not in tune with what many black evangelicals saw as the true Bible message. The evangelicalism they experienced stood not for justice or solidarity with the oppressed, but for the racial, social and economic status quo. For the most part, white evangelicals failed to confront the demons of racism within these structures; they failed to challenge their white worldviews, oppressive theologies and modes of evangelism. Black evangelicals in the late 20th century saw this, and they fought to change it. Their leaders, organizations and initiatives challenged the very idea of what it meant to be an evangelical Christian. They confronted white norms, asserting their own racial consciousness and expressions of evangelicalism that validated their experiences as black Christians within a racially oppressive tradition. Their efforts to contest the faith highlight how the categories of race and religion work simultaneously to construct the meaning of the term "evangelical."

At first, this process involved coming to terms with history. Black evangelical leaders in the 1960s and 1970s, many of whom were educated and highly active within the institutions of white fundamentalism and neoevangelicalism, came to understand the pervasive influence of whiteness on their religious and racial identities. Leaders such as William Bentley, William Pannell, Tom Skinner, Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm cultivated a unique black evangelical identity that embraced their position apart from the historic black church. They used this

liminal space to assert a black evangelical consciousness that called into question many evangelical presuppositions. They encouraged all evangelicals—black and white—to recognize the social implications of their faith and enter the fight for racial and economic justice with full force.

Even with a collectively renewed consciousness, black evangelicals in the late 20th century did not construct a monolithic movement. Black evangelicalism encompassed a wide array of groups and individuals who sometimes had different ideas about how to win the fight for racial justice. William H. Bentley, Columbus Salley, Carl Ellis and others championed a black nationalist approach to evangelical Christianity. This involved living out evangelicalism through blackness, focusing on black modes of evangelism and black methods of social engagement that often resulted in separatism. Organizations such as the National Black Evangelical Association and the National Black Christian Students Conference adapted Black Power ideology and black liberation theology to their evangelical worldviews. By building separate communities, black evangelical nationalists interrogated white norms and some white evangelicals listened. Progressive white Christians who associated with the evangelical left, such as John Alexander and Jim Wallis, heard the cry for racial justice and brought the message of black nationalist evangelicals back to their own majority white communities. Black evangelical separatists therefore successfully challenged white evangelical standards by creating their own alternatives to them.

Other African American evangelical leaders contested the faith from within. Tom Skinner and John Perkins, two notable examples, did not hold back from telling

white evangelicals what they thought about their perceived commitments to evangelical social action. They criticized the white values of the emerging Christian Right and pushed white evangelicals to think about their roles within racist structures. They encouraged white Christians to use their convictions to join the fight for justice in solidarity with the oppressed. Skinner and Perkins created communities that exposed white and black evangelicals to one another in hopes that this exposure would create a biblically reconciled faith. They did not separate from white evangelicalism, but rather built communities and organizations together with white evangelicals in the hopes of fostering an evangelical love and understanding whose ultimate goal was to transcend racial differences. The legacies of Skinner and Perkins are still being felt in the evangelical world today, with many black and white evangelicals responding to the call for racial reconciliation.

These narratives are only one way to tell the story of 20th century black evangelicalism. Further research is needed in order to expand the biographies and historical legacies of these characters, many of whom are still active in the world of evangelicalism today. In addition, as scholars, we must expose other histories that might be currently missing from the saga of American evangelicalism. Some scholars have already begun this process, and we must follow their lead to include the narratives of Asian Americans, Latinos and other marginalized evangelical communities in order to widen the scope of my study and broaden our understandings of how race and religion operate in the evangelical world.

We must also recognize that these histories are current—they are still being lived out in the religious, political and cultural spheres around us. Black evangelical

racial consciousness did not end in the 1980s. The fight for racial justice among American evangelicals continues to this day. John Perkins was recently interviewed in *Christianity Today* responding to the death of 18-year-old Michael Brown at the hands of white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. "How we act shows that we haven't developed an understanding of reconciliation that is tough enough to deal with these incidents," Perkins declared, "We need a biblical response, not a human response."[234] Perkins' commitment to biblical reconciliation remains at the core of his views on American race relations, and he continues to be a force in the evangelical world. Likewise, the National Black Evangelical Association, which earlier this month held its 52nd Year Convention in Chicago, posted several articles about the shootings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner on its website. Writing for the NBEA, Dr. Carl Ellis exclaimed, "The politically charged left and right wing approaches to the current crisis are woefully inadequate … Biblical wisdom still stands as the source for true understanding. It empowered the Civil Rights Movement and undergirds our sense of human dignity and worth as it affirms that we are in the image of God – the foundation for 'Black is beautiful.'"[235] The Reverend Henry Lee Allen, who currently sits on the Board of Directors of the NBEA, also warned, "The God of Israel will deal with the indifference and treachery of corrupt

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[234] Amy Julia Becker, "John Perkins: The Sin of Racism Made Ferguson Escalate So Quickly," *Thin Places*, accessed April 27, 2015, http://www.christianitytoday.com/amyjuliabecker/2014/august/john-perkins-sin-of-racism-made-ferguson-escalate-so-quickl.html.

[235] Carl Ellis Jr., "Racism Alone? Reflections on the Current National Divide," *Prophets of Culture*, December 12, 2104, http://drcarlellisjr.blogspot.com/2014/12/racism-alone-reflections-on-current.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+ProphetsOfCulture+%28Prophets+of+Culture%29.

societies at His appointed time! The folly of Ferguson and similar incidents will not escape His purview!"[236] The 20th century histories of the black evangelical movement are thus alive and well. In today's fraught political climate, these histories demand our attention. At a time when American evangelicals have a place in the halls of U.S. power, to discern how race and theology work together to construct the evangelical worldview is to better understand the political, social and religious worlds in which we live.

[236] Henry L. Allen, "Fergusuon, Foolishness, and the Folly of Failure in the United States," *National Black Evangelical Association*, n.d., http://www.the-nbea.org/ferguson-foolishness-and-the-folly-of-failure-in-the-united-states/.

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