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*"In the Wake of Empire: Christian Expansionism and the Cold War"*

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# In the Wake of Empire

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## *Christian Expansionism and the Cold War*

### **Introduction**

As European empires lost political control of much of the world, evangelical Christians saw an aggressively expanding Communism become a new archenemy, and they countered by redoubling their missionary efforts. Worried still about saving souls, American evangelicals worried too about saving vast regions of the world from the onslaught of communism. Southern Baptists were in the forefront of the American missionary effort in the post war world, embarking on a mission expansion which Stephan Neil called “second to no other in the world.”<sup>i</sup> Yet, if Southern Baptist were among those who pursued missions as an antidote to Communism, they also felt most clearly the tensions created by their efforts to evangelize among the world’s peoples—especially in Africa—while maintaining racial segregation at home. Thus, in the wake of empire, Southern Baptists redoubled their evangelical efforts to counter the threat of communism, an effort which also forced them to confront Jim Crow Christianity in the South within the context of the Cold War.

### **The End of Empire of in Southern Baptist Thought**

In the aftermath of World War II, W. O. Carver tied the end of colonialism to the establishment of a lasting peace. Carver, emeritus professor of missions from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, argued: “not for even one generation longer can all the power and force and ingenuity of the white races maintain a position of preferred tenants of God’s earth which he has peopled with twice as many colored as white men.” Carver feared that Europeans would attempt to preserve their empires and that the United States might become “the patron of empires, the guardian angel of imperialism, and

prosperous leader of a new era of materialism.” French and British efforts to shore up the old colonial system in Asia and Africa worked against peace. Simply put, “the clash of color” had to be resolved or “not all the skill of diplomacy and manipulation of natural resources [could] preserve a peace that would have at its heart arrogance and exploitation.”<sup>ii</sup>

Such an attack on colonialism, and the clear connection drawn between colonialism and racism, was particularly important in the Cold War, when colonial powers were allies against Communism. According to historians Mary L. Dudziak and Penny Von Eschen, the Cold War narrowed the scope of legitimate protest. Criticism of colonialism itself, much less its racial implications, simply could not be accommodated. Eric Foner noted that the “vision of racial inequality in the United States as part of global system rather than as a maladjustment between American ideals and behavior did not long survive the advent of the cold war.” Yet, Baptist missionaries and mission leaders not only critiqued colonialism, they tied it directly to segregation in the United States. They persisted in tying American racism to its global context, though certainly recognizing that racism and segregation also represented a failure of America to live up to its ideals.<sup>iii</sup>

While the Baptists were critical of imperialism and attempts to preserve it, George W. Sadler, the Foreign Mission Board Secretary for Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, argued that Americans should not gloat over the troubles of Empires. Instead, they should be “awed by the new responsibility that has come to us as a result of the bankruptcy of Britain.” The Baptists’ new evangelical efforts in the British colonies focused on health care and education. Some Baptists, wary of the Social Gospel, argued that ministering to the worldly needs of people was not true evangelism. Sadler disagreed. He said, “it is God’s love in action. It is God’s grace expressing itself through Christ-centered teachers and Christ dominated doctors and nurses.” Such mission efforts, far from being tainted with the Social Gospel, were crucial antidotes to communism. As Georgia pastor George A. Buttrick noted,

communism could not thrive on its hollow ideology alone. It thrived instead upon human hunger and bitterness.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Assessing the Challenge: The Communist Threat**

Of all the threats to Christianity and world peace, Baptist leaders clearly viewed Communism as the most serious. The message was certainly an easy sell in the United States during the Cold War, and Baptist youth often heard the message from mission education leaders on a regular basis; as one noted, “today, the greatest threat to Christianity and Democracy is communism.”<sup>v</sup>

Baptists believed that Communism functioned as a religion, a false one to be sure, but a religion nonetheless. Billy Graham was in Los Angeles in 1948 when he heard that the Soviet Union had successfully tested an atomic device. He announced, “Communism is a religion that is inspired, directed, and motivated by the Devil himself.” Noted theologian John C. Bennett, agreed with Graham that Communism presented itself as a religion. In his work, *Christianity and Communism*, he warned against identifying Christianity with capitalism, but noted that Communism operated as both an economic system and a religion. In September of 1949, Southern Baptists leaders included *Christianity and Communism* on a list of recommended readings for youth involved in the Royal Ambassador and Girl’s Auxiliary programs.<sup>vi</sup>

If Baptists saw Communism as a religion, they also saw it as an evangelical religion in the sense that it actively, even aggressively, sought converts. Writing for *Home Life*, Fred W. Hoffman noted that “Leaders of world communism have boasted of their purpose [to] conquer and rule the world.” Hoffman argued that Communist leaders intended to take the world by deception and infiltration if simple force proved an impossible mechanism. He wrote: “atheistic communism is now wooing the world with its propaganda. Its workers are

penetrating every nation and every strata of society.” Only evangelical Christianity could counter evangelical communism.<sup>vii</sup>

J. B. Lawrence told readers of *Home Missions* that “the answer to Communism and all the isms that infest and infect civilization today is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Baptists youth got the same message; the April 1949 monthly mission study program for youth revolved around the theme “Christ: the Answer to Atheistic Communism.”<sup>viii</sup>

Time, however, was short and Communists were moving quickly. Clyde Dotson argued, “Communism is sowing the seeds of hatred in many hearts.” Dotson served in Southern Rhodesia where racial tensions were worse than even in the American South. There, in the shadow of South African apartheid, the “breach between white and black” was growing ever wider. Dotson announced: “it is only the power of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ that can help people under such circumstances.”<sup>ix</sup>

Communism offered oppressed peoples false hopes, and denied that Christianity could offer true hope. H. Cornell Goerner, professor of Missions at the Southern Seminary, reminded Baptists that Communists promised that they would eliminate all racial distinction and give freedom to those who still, even after two world wars, labored under the yolk of colonialism. Goerner understood that “a new Africa is in the making,” and it was up to Christians to offer the way of Christ and peace for overcoming the legacy of racism and colonialism. Communism, he believed, offered alternative way of overcoming that legacy, the way of “bloody revolution, bitterness, and hatred.” Missionaries in the field, however, faced the problem of being associated with the past and imperialism rather than with the future and freedom, despite the fact that most supported African independence from European political control.<sup>x</sup>

If missionaries in Africa failed to sever the inherited association between Christianity and European domination, it would be an open invitation to the Communists. The Foreign Mission Board informed Baptists that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev called for the expulsion of missionaries from Africa. Khrushchev said, “missionaries are the agents of formerly imperialistic nations which are using them in an attempt to reconquer their lost colonies.” Baptists, however, believed that Communist leaders were really concerned about the possibility of mission successes. Hermione Dannelly Jackson, writing for *The Window*, recognized that Communists wanted an end to Christian missions but offered different reasons from those put forth by Khrushchev. She argued, “Communists recognize the mission movement as a bond of good will between the people they seek to control and the United States.” Baptists were not expelled from Africa; instead, their program expanded.<sup>xi</sup>

### ***Advance in Africa***

Africa offered both peril and promise. While mission efforts there would be difficult, L. Howard Jenkins, president of the Foreign Mission Board, told Southern Baptists: “In Africa, the possibilities seem unlimited. The doors are wide open.” When Jenkins wrote in 1945, Baptists had only 45 missionaries to Africa, all in Nigeria. Jenkins prodded Baptists, saying, “we must send many more to Africa.” By 1965, their efforts had increased tenfold, with 447 Southern Baptist missionaries working in 83 cities and towns across 10 African nations.<sup>xii</sup>

As regional secretary for Africa, George Sadler emphasized that continent’s importance in the post-war world. He noted that, “the part of the globe that was known for many years as the ‘Dark Continent’ is speedily claiming its rightful place in the scheme of things that . . . we have the courage to call ‘one world.’” Missions, Sadler believed, would

play a vital role in shaping post-war Africa. He said, “God and the British government are counting on us to make available the agencies of peace and spiritual power.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Baptist missionaries believed that Africans would be more receptive to Christianity’s message if they could sever it from the oppressive and racist legacy of western imperialism. Severing the connection between Christianity and Western exploitation, however, could prove difficult. M. Theron Rankin, executive secretary of the Foreign Mission Board, warned Baptists that Communists examined the West looking for faults they could use to associate Christianity with imperialism. He concluded that, “whereas we were once looked to as the champions of the oppressed, we are now classified with the oppressors.” That classification was in part, at least according to W. O. Carver, because imperialism persisted after World War II only because “the might and the money of America . . . [was] used to restore and perpetuate the British, Dutch, French, and even Belgian empires in Africa and the Orient.”<sup>xiv</sup>

The legacy of imperialism haunted Southern Baptist missionaries simply because they were white. Marjorie Moore Armstrong of the Foreign Mission Board reported that a missionary had once told her, in confidence, that, “it takes so long to live down the reputation of the white man in West Africa. My white skin identifies me with the slave trader, the whiskey dealer, and the bearer of venereal disease.” The situation persisted even though the majority of missionaries sympathized with African desires for independence and equality. As one missionary explained, “we teach and preach the Christian doctrine of the equality of men under God . . . the Africans take it from there.”<sup>xv</sup> The direction of independent Africa, however, was of grave concern to Baptist mission leaders.

George Sadler noted “we have grave misgivings about the future of an un-Christian Africa,” which could succumb to Communism. Missionaries had been in the lead of educational efforts in Africa. Missionaries recognized that the rising expectations of African leaders were, at least in part, a product of those efforts.<sup>xvi</sup>

Mission schools played an important role in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria serves as an example: in 1951, the Baptists enrolled 31,000 students in their schools, accounting for nearly ten per cent of all Nigerians attending school. Samuel A. Lawoyin, a Nigerian Baptist studying at Virginia Union University explained that World War II had awakened both nationalism and the desire for education. Imperialists would not offer education to the Africans, he said, because their paramount interest was to exploit the continent's resources with "very little or no regard for the people." The remaining educational choices, Lawoyin believed, were between the Communists or the Christian missions. Baptist leaders in America and Africa hoped and prayed that Communists would not gain control of the continent during the turmoil of unprecedented changes brought by independence. Christian schools, they believed, would play a key role in keeping Communism – and Islam – at bay. As Cal Guy argued, "the African of tomorrow will be Mohammedan, Communist, or Christian depending on who teaches him to read."<sup>xvii</sup>

### **Contradiction of Segregation**

Missionaries were caught in the middle of a tense racial situation that emerged with the end of colonialism. Communism exploited racial and economic tensions, created discontent, and, perhaps most importantly, denied the relevance of Christianity and the very existence of God. Racial tensions in America were easy for Communists to exploit because technology allowed increasingly rapid communications; whatever happened in America made world-wide headlines and had world-wide implications. Southern Baptist missionaries, with their white skin, were often associated with colonizers. That was a difficult enough challenge, but modern communications had made the world "one great whispering-gallery." While all news traveled fast, Goerner believed that news of racial problems in the United States "spread with unusual speed." He feared that such news items could "quickly destroy



good will and understanding which the missionary has laboriously built up over the years and may create embarrassments and problems which greatly hinder his work.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Missionaries in the field agreed with Goerner’s analysis. Joanna Maiden, a medical missionary in Nigeria, related an exemplary incident to Southern Baptists shortly after the integration of the University of Georgia, which involved a riot. Maiden noted that a young ward assistant asked her if Georgia was an important place in the United States. While she did not provide readers of *The Commission* with her answer, she wrote, “perhaps a native Georgian could have answered him more gracefully than I did, but I am asked similar things about Virginia, my home state, and I can’t answer without embarrassment.” Similarly, Sydney Pearce, who served in Kenya, hoped Americans, and in particularly Baptists, would quickly find a solution to the nation’s race problem. She asked, “when will Southern Baptists become outraged enough over the oppression taking place in our country that they will correct this thing which has now become an actual hindrance to the work of the Lord around the world.”<sup>xix</sup>

Missionaries frequently wrote for Baptist publications, trying to push Baptists to recognize the international implications of the American racial situation and the damage it did to their evangelical efforts. Nevertheless, the most direct challenge the Baptist mission effort presented to segregation came in the form of African Christians, many of whom were mission converts, who came to the United States to study. Some, like Ed Reynolds and Sam Oni presented their challenge by applying to segregated Southern Baptist universities. Others, like Adbokun Oshoniyi and Bisi Adegbile, sought membership in Southern Baptist churches during their stay in the United States. Regardless, their presence and their insistence on being accepted as brothers and sisters in Christ forced Southern Baptists to consider the implications segregation had for their missionary effort. While their efforts could be protracted, they typically met with some degree of success.<sup>xx</sup>

Wake Forrest desegregated to admit Reynolds and Mercer desegregated to admit Oni. Nevertheless, not all Southern Baptists were convinced. After Sam Oni applied to Mercer University, W. J. Thurmond, argued if the success of mission activity was “contingent upon the admission of this Negro student to Mercer, then I also say let’s call all our missionaries home.” Others, however, were willing to reconsider their position. Jack Carpenter of Dahlonga wrote, “my good friends and brethren will understand and forgive me if I say that, in spite of my middle-age conservatism, I cannot help but gag at the idea of excluding a young African convert from our beloved Mercer simply because God gave him dark skin.”<sup>xxi</sup>

Perhaps the debate at Westside Baptist Church in Gainesville, Florida was even more indicative of the difficulties created by Jim Crow Christianity in the Cold War years. The problem revolved around Johncyna Williams, an African American student at the University of Florida and member of the institution’s Baptist Student Union. Her attendance with BSU members at the otherwise all-white Westside caused those members who opposed integration to demand the church’s planning committee do something. The debate reflected several themes that the progressive Baptist leadership had stressed during the Cold War years, notably the international dimensions of the race question. As one noted member asked, “how can we send missionaries to Africa and then discriminate against the American Negro.” Williams’ case was different because she was not an African, but an African American, thus at Westside the congregation realized the treatment of African American could no more easily be severed from missions than the treatment of foreign students from Africa. The congregation determined to accept any Christian regardless of race, with about one-fourth dissenting.<sup>xxii</sup>

## Conclusion

Southern Baptist certainly raised the specter of Communism in their effort to garner increased support for mission activity after World War II. Certainly, their fears of Communism were sincere, and certainly Communism and Christianity were at odds with each other. Yet, the missionary enterprise is, fundamentally, optimistic. And Southern Baptists were optimistic. They firmly believed Christianity would outlast, even defeat, Communism, and that Christianity would preserve the west and possibly conquer Africa and much of the rest of the world. Charles Wells' cartoon for the *Baptist Student* of a sickle labeled "communism" attempting to cut down the crosses that made up the field of "world Christianity" displayed that conviction of hope. The title itself showed Wells' intent, as he called the cartoon "losing its edge." Underneath, he wrote: "The Communists are still cutting away at the cross. For over thirty years the Bolsheviks have tried to destroy the church. But the crosses keep growing, multiplying until the Reds are beginning to acknowledge that the more crosses they cut down the more there are to face."<sup>xxiii</sup>

Missionaries kept those crosses growing and multiplying. Southern Baptists missionary zeal in the wake of empire took a distinctly Cold War tone. In the absence of European political power, only Christianity—they believed—stood in the way of communist expansion in the former colonies, especially in Africa. Their missionary efforts, however, were hampered by racism in the American South. Missionaries protested that segregation in America damaged their efforts, but the strongest challenge came from African students studying in America. While no one incident undid segregation in Baptist institutions, the challenge was considerably and those Baptist institutions which faced directly the challenge from African Students typically chose missions over segregation. Christian missions in the war against atheist communism had to prevail, even at the expense of segregation.

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<sup>i</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition with revision by Owen Chadwick (New York and London: Penguin 91986), 421 fn#8.

<sup>ii</sup> W. O. Carver, "Civilization's Supreme Need," *Commission* 7:6 (June 1945): 5; W. O. Carver, "What Sort of New World," *Commission* 8:10 (November 1945): 5; Carver, "Important Changes of Direction," *Commission* 10:3 (March 1947): 5; Robert Kinloch Massie, *Loosing the Bonds: The United States and South Africa in the Apartheid Years* (London and New York: Nan A. Talese of Doubleday, 1997); Lewis H. Gann, *Central Africa: The Former British States* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971), 139.

<sup>iii</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 11; Penny Von M. Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black American and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) p. 112-121; Eric Foner, *Who Owns History: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 67.

<sup>iv</sup> George W. Sadler, "Report of the Secretary for Africa, Europe and the Near East," MFMB, (April 8, 1947); Sadler, "Report" MFMB (April 11, 1951); George A. Buttrick, "God, Children, and the Present World," *Home Life* (March 1952) 25.

<sup>v</sup> Laura Young Monroe, "Freedom on Trial," *World Comrades*, (October 1950) 28.

<sup>vi</sup> Graham quoted in Marty, *Modern American Religion*, 152; John C. Bennett, *Christianity and Communism* (New York: A Haddam House Book, Association Press, 1948); "Read About Russia," *World Comrades* (September 1949) 3; Robert Shapiro, "Christianity, Democracy, and Communism," *The Baptist Student* (February 1954) 8.

<sup>vii</sup> Fred W. Hoffman, "What's Ahead for Our Children," *Home Life*, (July 1963) 8.

<sup>viii</sup> Lawrence, "Missions and the March of Events: The Answer to Communism," *HM* 19:12 (December 1948); Helen Conger, "Christ the Answer to Godless Ideas," *World Comrades* (September, 1949) 20-21.

<sup>ix</sup> Dotson quoted in M. Theron Rankin, "Report of the Foreign Mission Board," *SBC*, (1952), 108-9; Gann, *Central Africa*, 135-140.

<sup>x</sup> H. Cornell Goerner, "Meetings for Intermediate Royal Ambassadors, fourth intermediate meeting: Communism and World Missions," *AL*, 4:3 (September 1949): 18.

<sup>xi</sup> Khrushchev quoted in "Foreign Mission News," *Commission* 27:7 (July 1964): 28; Hermione Dannelly Jackson, "Program: headaches in the Far East," *Window* 23:3 (November 1951): 33.

<sup>xii</sup> L. Howard Jenkins, "Foreign Missions in Spite of War," *Commission* 11: 3 (March 1945): 1; "Africa's 'Remarkable Progress' Noted," *Commission* 24:3 (March 1965): 36.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sadler, "Report," MFMB (October 8, 1954).

<sup>xiv</sup> M. Theron Rankin, "The World Demands Proof," *Commission* 15:1 (January 1952): 9; John R. Sampey, Jr. "Equatorial Africa," *Commission* 9:12 (December 1946): 17, 24; W. O. Carver, "What Sort of New World," *Commission* 8:10 (November 1945): 5; Marjorie Moore Armstrong, "Program: Choosing the Most Excellent Way (Christian Citizenship)," *RS* 47:4 (October 1952): 30.

<sup>xv</sup> Armstrong, "Choosing the Most Excellent Way," 30; Mrs. William McMurry, "Did You Read It?: The Role of the Missionary in Africa," *RS* 56:7 (January 1963): 15; King, *Christian and Muslim in Africa*, 105-6.

<sup>xvi</sup> Sadler, "Report," MFMB (April 30, 1949); Sadler, "Report" MFMB, (April 10-11, 1956); W. O. Carver, "What Hope," *Commission* 11:3 (March 1948): 20.

<sup>xvii</sup> Mills, "All Things to All Men" 4-5; Elizabeth Ferguson, "Epistles," *Commission* 13:6 (June 1950): 21; Cal Guy, "Meetings for Intermediate Royal Ambassadors, third intermediate meeting: What Of Our First Hundred Years in Africa?," *AL* 5:2 (July 1950): 16; George W. Sadler, "Students in Nigeria," *BS* 29:6 (March 1949): 4-5.

<sup>xviii</sup> J. B. Lawrence, "Missions and the March of Events," *Home Missions* 17: 12 (December 1946): 2; "Report of the Social Service Commission," *SBC*, (1947), 301; Goerner, "Race Relations: A Factor in World Missions," *BJC*, FMB.

<sup>xix</sup> Joanna C. Maiden quoted in "Foreign Mission News," *Commission* 20:6 (June 1961): 12. ; Sydney Pearce, "Epistles," *Commission* 26:8 (September 1963): 16.

<sup>xx</sup> Alan Scot Willis, "Our Preaching Has Caught Up With Us: Exploring the Impact of Southern Baptist Missions in Africa on the Southern Baptist Heartland," *World History Bulletin* (Spring 2007) 37-38.

<sup>xxi</sup> "Majority of Letters Favor Admitting Ghanaian," *Christian Index*, March 7, 1963, 3; "Missionary Agrees," *CI*, March 14, 1963, 7; "Differ on Ghanaian," *CI*, April 11, 1963, 8.

<sup>xxii</sup> John W. Touchberry, "The Westside Story," *The Baptist Student* (June 1964): 27-8. See also Trillin, *An Education in Georgia*, 176-9.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Charles Wells, "Loosing Its Edge," *The Baptist Student* (March 1951), 27.