

# A MORAL CRUSADE: The Preservation of Segregation by Southern Baptists in Alabama

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*This paper explores how members of the Southern Baptist (SB) denomination developed their arguments, tactics, and rhetoric to stall integration during the Civil Rights Movement (CRM). It argues that the physical and ideological structure of the SB denomination and the Biblical argument underlying the fight against integration were the catalyst for the SB response to the CRM. As the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC) annual reports—SBC's resolutions passed at their yearly convention meetings—and The Alabama Baptist demonstrate, many SB leaders determined that preventing integration was a moral crusade instituted by God. These writings reveal that the SB argument for segregation rested solely on the authority of scripture, the emphasis placed on individual autonomy, and the threat of God's wrath towards humanity—and the nation—should it not abide by his commands. As a result of this language, integration was significantly stalled in Alabama and the road was paved for the denomination to later achieve political ascendancy.*

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## Introduction

Inflamed by the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) and responses to it, the United States faced widespread turmoil and divisiveness during the 1950s-1960s. Many citizens and institutions had to again contend with this century-long “moral dilemma”: whether to condone or condemn integration. Since the Southern Baptist (SB) denomination was the largest and the most influential tradition in the South during this time period, this was an especially acute conflict for certain Southern Baptists.<sup>1</sup> Many Southern Baptists in Alabama utilized their long-held beliefs in local church autonomy, a priesthood of all believers, the separation of church and state, and biblical inerrancy to forge a framework that was in opposition to swift and progressive change, both in the denomination and throughout the state.<sup>2</sup> Segregationists in this tradition later abused this network in order to supersede the SB belief in the separation of church and state. Once this was accomplished, segregationists entered the political realm based on purported righteousness while convincing other Southern Baptists that doing the same did not undo the current denominational structure, but it, in fact, sustained it. By allowing autonomous churches and individuals to decide how to combat integration, certain Southern Baptist leaders exhibited segregationist ideas as righteous, moral, and necessary, creating a path for Southern Baptists to carry out their holy war, preventing integration at all costs.

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Flynt, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 77-85.

<sup>2</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

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A major component of the Southern Baptist denomination's argument against integration entailed maintaining that God's vision for humanity on earth ought to be determined by the book of Genesis and interpreted by white, male leaders in the tradition. According to these men, God divinely ordained a separation of the races in order to prevent pervasive immorality.<sup>3</sup> Anything less than vigilantly promoting this social hierarchy was considered heresy.<sup>4</sup> In order to make God's vision a reality on earth, segregationist Southern Baptists began melding "the religious" and with "the political" in their own tradition in new ways. This brought their concerns directly to the laity and solidified an ideology suitable in the previously forbidden political realm. After, this racial hierarchy was presented to the state in what was called "mission work."<sup>5</sup> Southern Baptist leaders accomplished this primarily through presenting resolutions at their annual convention meetings, which, once accepted, were later promulgated in local churches.<sup>6</sup> After these propositions were instituted on the provincial level, their racial orthodoxy was presented in publications like the *Alabama Baptist*. For example, Leon Macon, editor of this publication, argued that God had indeed established a clear social hierarchy during the creation account, thereby placing the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC) claims in the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> The Southern Baptist Denomination's structure and belief system, their utilization of that framework at their annual convention meetings, and the permeation of this construct into the political world, as seen through Leon Macon's writings, reveals that the Southern Baptist response to the CRM was slow but effective because it flourished in both religious and secular realms. In addition, this Southern Baptist argument against integration emphasized the individual's ability to choose the best moral response to the CRM in the political realm in ways that the denomination itself could not accomplish.

In this paper, I explore the numerous denominational publications such as the SBC's annuals, pamphlets documenting the proceedings of the SBC's yearly gathering, and resolutions, passed and affirmed at the annual convention, that were released during the CRM. In addition, I examine writings by prominent Southern Baptists such as Leon Macon's editorial page in the *Alabama Baptist*. As a result, it is clear that the SB denomination succeeded in portraying integration as immoral because they utilized rhetoric which emphasized that God's vision for humanity entailed a separation of the races. These writings also reveal that the Southern Baptists' argument for segregation rested solely on the authority of scripture, the emphasis placed on individual autonomy, and the threat of God's wrath towards humanity should they not abide by his commands. This paper argues that an examination of the physical and ideological structure of the Southern Baptist denomination and the Biblical argument underlying the fight against integration were the catalyst for the SB response to the CRM. Examining these aspects of the denomination first exhibits that the rhetoric utilized by the SBC and Leon Macon was effective because it emphasized individual choice, God's vision for humanity, and the precarious position the nation's morality occupied. As a result of this language, integration was significantly stalled in Alabama and the road was paved for the denomination to later achieve political ascendancy.

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew M. Manis, "'Dying from the neck up': Southern Baptist Resistance to the Civil Rights Movement." *Baptist History and Heritage* 34, no. 1 (1999): 112.

<sup>4</sup> Manis, "'Dying from the neck up,'" 112.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Macon, editorial, *Alabama Baptist*, August 10, 1950.

<sup>6</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Adams Wise, "Aspects of the Social Thought of Leon Macon: Editor of the Alabama Baptist, 1950-1965," (Master's thesis, Samford University) 54-56.

## Historiography

Most studies discussing religion in the American South during the mid-20th century have primarily focused on either the role that religion played in the push for integration or Southern Baptist history as a whole. For example, Paul Harvey's *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* is largely concerned with analyzing the religious life of African Americans oppressed by slavery and segregation.<sup>8</sup> Wayne Flynt's *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie* focuses on the construction, development, and history of the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, John Lee Eighmy's *Churches in Cultural Captivity: a History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* discusses the prevalence of Southern Baptists' social attitudes in constructing a virtuous society.<sup>10</sup> All of these works are incredibly fruitful when discussing race and religion in Alabama, but they do not address how the Southern Baptist Denomination's response to the Civil Rights Movement evolved from passive approval to vigilantism because the ideological and physical structure of the denomination created a moral entreaty against segregation which could exist and flourish in both the religious and secular spheres.

### The Physical and Ideological Structure of the Southern Baptist Denomination in Alabama

The Southern Baptist Denomination's size, multi-level structure, and ideological beliefs in local church autonomy, a priesthood of believers, and a separation of church and state all aided in portraying the preservation of segregation as a righteous and necessary cause. Although the composition of this denomination was initially designed with the intent to protect members from an overarching church hierarchy, segregationists exploited this construct during this time period to prevent rapid change within the tradition. This granted segregationists the time and mechanisms to thoroughly formulate a moral outcry against integration that later resounded throughout the entire state. Demands for integration by other Alabama citizens were overpowered by Southern Baptist segregationists, harming additional citizens, especially African-Americans.

By the time the CRM began, the Southern Baptist Denomination was the largest and most influential religious tradition in the South and especially in Alabama.<sup>11</sup> This group had the community and resources to fully implement their belief system inside and outside the denomination once they had adequately defined the methodology needed to ascertain God's vision on earth. This subsequently allowed them to blockade any government efforts.<sup>12</sup> The Southern Baptist Denomination's structure provided what appeared to be Biblically-led free choice: entire churches, individuals, and the whole tradition could choose to either reject or accept integration. In actuality, this structure operated as a facade allowing the entire institution to righteously uphold white supremacy. The first level of this organization contained the individual members of the denomination (Figure 1 below, Box 1). These people ranged from the laity to teachers to leaders such as deacons and pastors. When combined, these individuals comprised the local churches (Figure 1, Box 2). The

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 235.

<sup>9</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

<sup>10</sup> John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: a History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists*. With an Introd. and Epilogue by Samuel S. Hill, Jr (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972), 74.

<sup>11</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

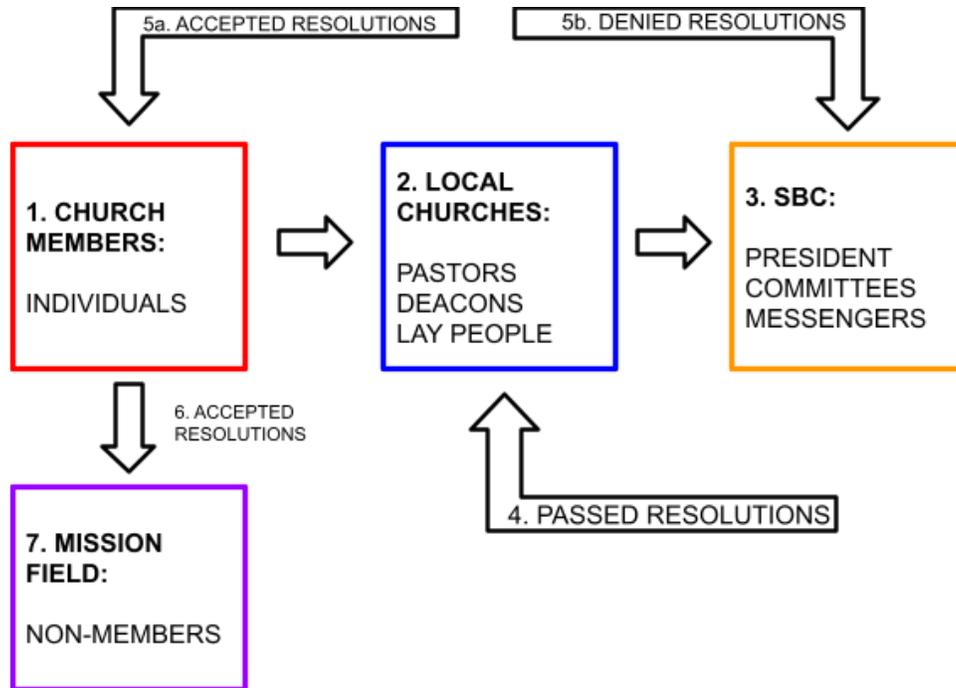
<sup>12</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

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separate congregations were spread throughout the South and operated independently of other churches and the denomination as a whole.<sup>13</sup> The next aspect of this tradition was the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC; Figure 1, Box 3).<sup>14</sup> The convention was both an annual gathering where Southern Baptists met to discuss pressing national issues and an institution composed of pastors from churches, convention officers, “messengers” or local church members, and convention committees. At the SBC’s annual meeting, various panels would convene to make recommendations based on the needs of the churches and the social situations present throughout the country.<sup>15</sup> These resolutions would then be presented at the convention where everyone would vote to pass or deny the propositions. The adopted resolutions would be published in that year’s convention annual, an essential primary source utilized in this study.<sup>16</sup> After publication, the annual would be presented to local churches (Figure 1, Box 4).<sup>17</sup> At which point congregations would decide either to accept the resolutions (Figure 1, Box 5a), bestowing them onto individual members (Figure 1, Box 6) who would take them out into the mission field (Figure 1, Box 7), or deny the resolutions sending them back to the SBC (Figure 1, Box 5b).<sup>18</sup>

The primary result of this organization was that it fostered a belief in local autonomy because each individual church could decide whether to accept or reject resolutions passed at the annual convention meeting without losing denominational

Figure 1: The organizational structure of the Southern Baptist Denomination.



membership.<sup>19</sup> This component was initially designed with what appeared to be an attempt at protecting local church members from a domineering ecclesiastical

<sup>13</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

<sup>14</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

<sup>15</sup> “Southern Baptist Convention. Christian Life Commission,” Southern Baptist Convention. Christian Life Commission - Social Networks and Archival Context, accessed June 10, 2019, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

<sup>17</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

<sup>18</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

<sup>19</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

construct because it slowed any sort of expeditious or unwanted change from occurring. In actuality, it was weaponized by segregationists during this time period to manufacture denomination-wide consent for their arguments.<sup>20</sup> Over time, the resolutions presented by segregationists at the annual meeting garnered support from a majority of the convention's members because it appeared to give each individual the freedom to decide if segregation was moral. This resolution-based organization along with the belief in local church autonomy was not only effective in preventing integration, it was also highly regarded as evidenced by the numerous defenses of this system in SBC annuals published during this time period.<sup>21</sup> This effort was simultaneously amplified by the denomination's belief in a priesthood of believers.

The Southern Baptist Convention, and its subsequent churches, also had a very distinct belief in a "priesthood of all believers" which pushed each individual Southern Baptists to carry the "good news" of segregation to those inside and outside of their home congregations.<sup>22</sup> In this tradition, the interpretation of scripture was not the sole responsibility of leadership, but of every member of a congregation.<sup>23</sup> However, if one was unsure of how to understand scriptural mandates, they were expected to consult leadership. This resulted in a wide array of viewpoints on various important topics such as segregation, racism, and discrimination.<sup>24</sup> Some parishioners held the view that the Bible supported segregation and condemned integration while others believed that there was no explicit support of segregation in the Bible.<sup>25</sup> Those who claimed that the Bible promoted segregation typically prevailed because the multi-tiered structure of the Southern Baptist Denomination in Alabama created a space resistant to change. As the current social construct was segregation, integration failed because it was "new." Initially, it would seem that a belief in a priesthood of all believers would prevent the spread of segregationists' arguments because this slowed the development of a cohesive denomination. In actuality, segregationists created an approach that focused on the individual's ability to choose the right course of action because the belief in a priesthood of believers was so highly regarded.

The Southern Baptist denomination's position on the separation of church and state further prevented integration throughout the state of Alabama. Many Southern Baptists wanted to prevent government control over religion in any capacity in the United States.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Leon Macon writes,

Baptists believe in the separation of church and state. They do not like to become partisan in politics, nor do they seek to influence legislation dealing with laws which do not involve morals and principles vital to the churches in America. In spite of the distastefulness of the task there are instances when churchmen must declare the positions of their constituency.<sup>27</sup>

Macon makes it clear that a majority of Southern Baptists were reluctant to enter politics because this goes against their initial faith in the complete separation of politics and religion. However, Southern Baptists still had a moral obligation to follow

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<sup>20</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, Annual Report 1958 (1958), 79; 391; Southern Baptist Convention, Annual Report 1965 (1965), 39; 84; 88-92; 139-140; 159; 245-247; Southern Baptist Convention, Annual Report 1960 (1960), 78-79.

<sup>21</sup> SBC, Annual Report 1958, 79; 391; SBC, Annual Report 1965, 39; 84; 88-92; 139-140; 159; 245-247; SBC, Annual Report 1960, 78-79.

<sup>22</sup> Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, 74.

<sup>25</sup> David L. Chappell, "Religious Ideas of the Segregationists," *Journal of American Studies* 32, no. 2 (1998), 241.

<sup>26</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 450.

<sup>27</sup> Leon Macon, editorial, *Alabama Baptist*, March 14, 1957.

God's call for configuring his ideal earth. When the situation becomes desperate, as it was during the CRM, capable leaders, such as Macon, are necessary for discussing their ideologies in the public forum. The argument for the separation of church and state may at first seem counterintuitive to the goals of Southern Baptists during this time period, but segregationists emphasized that it was the individual's responsibility to righteously enter the political realm in ways that the SBC could not, thus cohering with their stance on individual autonomy. The push for each Southern Baptist to morally enter the secular world, combined with the separation of religion and politics, was effective for manufacturing consent to segregationists' version of God's vision. Each individual was not obligated to do what segregationists were suggesting, but they were responsible for considering it as a viable course of action. From there, each person was expected to make what they felt was the correct moral choice, in this case, pushing segregation. However, each individual was expected to make their decision only after vigilantly studying scripture.

### **Segregation: A Biblical Mandate**

Although the use of the Bible as evidence for God's favor towards segregation was limited, many Southern Baptists still implemented this as a tool to prove that segregation was a righteous and necessary battle. During the Civil War, the Bible was regularly utilized to justify slavery as a moral institution because the canon had several instances of positive support for slavery.<sup>28</sup> However, segregationists lacked that same evidence. Instead, certain Southern Baptists appropriated the Bible to define their version of God's vision for earth claiming it was each individual's responsibility to interpret the pericopes ambivalent on social relations. An analysis of this usage and "evidence" reveals that leaders convinced lay people to institute the same ideology on the local level by encouraging each person to determine if segregation was cohesive with the Bible.

Southern Baptists who employed the Bible to support segregation primarily wanted to preserve the Southern way of life by creating "God's vision" on earth. A major issue that arose for segregationists when presenting the Bible as evidence for stopping integration was that the way people were separated in the Bible was entirely different from the discrimination they were promoting.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, segregationists exploited the denomination's acceptance of a priesthood of believers when reading passages that were ambiguous on equality.<sup>30</sup> They wanted each individual to evaluate this textual evidence and see that God had indeed designed earth to remain as it was during Biblical times. The primary passage that defined God's vision for these men was Acts 17:26, "... he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted ... the boundaries of the places where they would live." Here, these Southern Baptists claimed that God had created separate habitations for different people in ancient times that should be preserved in the present day. Segregationists claimed that the Bible's inerrancy made Scripture insusceptible to changing cultural trends, such as the CRM.<sup>31</sup> Since these passages were unclear, each Christian had an obligation to attempt understanding the text and seek the guidance of denominational leadership to clarify its meaning if they were unsure.<sup>32</sup> The numerous Southern Baptists who elected to adopt this two-fold plan—individual Biblical interpretation, alongside conversations

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<sup>28</sup> Chappell, "Religious Ideas of the Segregationists," 241.

<sup>29</sup> Manis, "Dying from the neck up," 112.

<sup>30</sup> Manis, "Dying from the neck up," 112.

<sup>31</sup> Robison B. James, Gary H. Leazer, and James Shoopman, *The Fundamentalist Takeover in the Southern Baptist Convention: a Brief History* (Timisoara, Romania: Impact Media, 1999), 23.

<sup>32</sup> Ray M. Atchison, *Baptists of Shelby County, Alabama* (Birmingham, AL: Banner Publishers, 1964), 10.

with denominational leaders—agreed that segregation is God’s vision for earth, as Acts 17:26 suggests.

In addition to promoting God’s vision as a separation of the races, several Southern Baptists also utilized the canon to dismantle integrationists’ arguments. For example, integrationists claimed that since Galatians 3:26-28 states, “... you are all children of God through faith ... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female ... ” implying that God intended for all people to be equal throughout the earth.<sup>33</sup> This would therefore necessitate integration being implemented rather than segregation being maintained.<sup>34</sup> Many Southern Baptists, on the other hand, argued that there was still separation present in the canon such as the construct presented in Acts 17:26. Southern Baptists declared that this one passage in Galatians was not enough evidence to condone changing the three-hundred-year-old social hierarchy present in the south.<sup>35</sup> According to proponents of this argument, preserving the separation of the races was a righteous and necessary cause.

Southern Baptists also found positive support for segregation in Biblical passages such as the story of the great flood in Genesis. For segregationists, the events leading up to the flood demonstrated why God enacted it,

The sons of God went into the daughters of humans, who bore children to them ... The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth ... So the Lord said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created ... for I am sorry that I have made them.’

According to them, this passage proved that the flood occurred because the races mixed resulting in unrighteous behavior throughout the earth. It was believed that if integration was implemented then “amalgamation,” or intermarriage, would occur leading to increased immorality similar to that of Noah’s time. This would inevitably cause God to punish all people, as he did here.<sup>36</sup> However, Christians still had to take the “good news” of Jesus to all people while maintaining God’s divinely ordained hierarchy.<sup>37</sup> An examination of these Biblical arguments reveals that preserving the Southern way of life and protecting God’s supposed vision for earth were primary goals of many Southern Baptists. However, these arguments were much weaker than their predecessors’ because there is significantly less in the canon that explicitly supported segregation. Therefore, Southern Baptists in Alabama had to branch out from solely Biblical rhetoric. This involved looking at the political, constitutional, and social ramifications of integration. Although a solely Biblical argument was successful at sustaining slavery, it was not enough to maintain an argument for segregation. Therefore, by going beyond the pages of the canon, Southern Baptists began to weaponize extra-religious realms in order to present segregation as a righteous cause that the rest of the nation should follow. This initially involved the Southern Baptists denomination making arguments about the moral consequences of implementing integration. Later on, prominent Southern Baptists leaders, such as Leon Macon, melded the religious and the political in extra-denominational publications by focusing on the social and political ramifications of integration.

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<sup>33</sup> Chappell, “Religious Ideas of the Segregationists,” 241.

<sup>34</sup> Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming*, 235; Numan V. Bartley, *The New South 1945-1980: The Story of the South’s Modernization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1995), 160.

<sup>35</sup> Manis, “Dying from the neck up,” 112.

<sup>36</sup> Chappell, “Religious Ideas of the Segregationists,” 246; Manis, “Dying from the neck up,” 1.

<sup>37</sup> At this time, missions were separated based on race as well; Southern Baptist Convention, Annual Report 1956 (1956), 71-75; 195-196; 335.

Although Southern Baptists seemed to be moving away from the Bible, they still utilized the canon as the foundation of their arguments.

### **The SBC's Response to *Brown v. Board* (1954)**

The passage of *Brown v. Board* (1954) ignited numerous responses from all across the nation but presented Southern Baptists with an especially unique challenge.<sup>38</sup> As discussed previously, many Southern Baptists were incredibly reluctant to be involved in political discussions because of the belief in the separation of church and state. However, as the responses to the CRM became more violent and chaotic, segregationists felt a moral and spiritual obligation to preserve God's vision and prevent integration. At first, denominational leaders responded passively and advocated "cautious acquiescence" towards the mandate.<sup>39</sup> This recommendation later evolved into actively promoting interposition or interference with Supreme Court mandates.<sup>40</sup> As the CRM progressed, many Southern Baptists became even more involved in the political and secular world, but they needed to justify for this substantial deviation from the previously recommended course of action. SBC publications and annuals from their convention meetings reveal that Southern Baptists wanted to abide by legal statutes but God's command for a global Christian community superseded those requirements. Therefore, it was the moral and spiritual obligation of every Southern Baptist to maintain the community that God so clearly outlined in scripture. These same denomination-wide proclamations were published by *Alabama Baptist* editor Leon Macon in order to convince outsiders to join the fight against integration. As a result, the Southern Baptist political stance became much clearer and vigilant over time.<sup>41</sup>

The first phase (1954-1957)<sup>42</sup> of "cautious acquiescence" largely entailed following the law but also promoting the segregationist version of racial harmony, or total separation.<sup>43</sup> When the Supreme Court ruled that "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place," it superseded all closely-held Biblical arguments previously made by Southern Baptists for supporting segregation.<sup>44</sup> The SBC responded rather apathetically when stating, "We recognize the fact that this Supreme Court decision is in harmony with the constitutional guarantee of equal freedom to all citizens, and with the Christian principles of equal justice and love for all men."<sup>45</sup> The SBC did not want to completely support the ruling or integration by advising tangible actions for carrying out this statute, but they also did not want to encourage unlawful disobedience because that could lead to the very chaos they were trying to prevent by promoting segregation. The main goal was to pacify African-Americans with subtle change while also retaining the white stronghold in the South and not subverting their belief in the separation of church and state.<sup>46</sup>

Near the end of this first phase, the SBC became much more persistent in their belief that integration would lead to more harm than good and that they had a moral obligation to stop it. This is largely represented by their response to the ruling in *Brown II*, which declared on May 31, 1955, that schools should be integrated with

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<sup>38</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 459-465.

<sup>39</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 459.

<sup>40</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 459.

<sup>41</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 459.

<sup>42</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 459.

<sup>43</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 459.

<sup>44</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 235; Bartley, *The New South 1945-1980*, 160.

<sup>45</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, Annual Report 1954 (1954), 56.

<sup>46</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 459.

“all deliberate speed.”<sup>47</sup> The convention resolved that “The far-reaching implication of [Brown II] has become the most disturbing issue ... [and] ... we will find the solution for this question on the local level and demonstrate to the world that men of every race can live together in peace.”<sup>48</sup> Local churches were thereby commissioned to decide independently how they would approach this issue because the implications of integration were more imminent than previously believed. Even so, the SBC still recommends that churches should not remain totally ambivalent, but must act in a Christian manner.<sup>49</sup> The SBC, through promoting clear action, challenged the belief in the “separation of church and state,” based on purported divinely-ordained separation of the races. The SBC thus concluded that a passive stance was necessary to slowly comply with the ruling’s decrees while also maintaining God’s righteous call for Southern Baptists.

The Little Rock Central High School crisis of 1957 precipitated the next phase of the SBC’s response, as described by Wayne Flynt.<sup>50</sup> This entailed a period of staunch segregationist stances which lasted until the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>51</sup> From this point forward, the SBC supported segregation due to the violence that was erupting in the South. In Alabama, many Southern Baptists viewed the riots as evidence that the races were meant to be separated as God intended. The SBC wrote in 1958, “Some of the tragic governmental conflicts involving race have obscured the fact that there are proven and accepted ways by which Southern Baptists may express their Christian concern for the minority’s welfare and progress.”<sup>52</sup> In this example, segregation is presented as a form of Christian and brotherly love. The SBC is arguing that in order to “love thy neighbor” as Christ exemplified, the races must be separate. In addition, certain Southern Baptists strongly held onto the concept of a clear separation of church and state because God’s law superseded man’s statutes. If government mandates contradicted God’s rulings in the Bible, then the canon’s commands must be preserved. This, once again, sustained their belief that integration was immoral and their definition of God’s vision was correct.

By the 1960s, the SBC formally admitted that they had to play an explicit role in politically and socially addressing the morally corrupt responses to the CRM. They stated, “This Convention in years past has expressed itself clearly and positively on issues related to race relations ... We believe that the race problem is a moral and spiritual as well as [a] social problem.”<sup>53</sup> Race was finally recognized as a problem needing Southern Baptists’ attention. Their response, however, was not integration, only non-violence. The SBC wanted their members to exhibit the love of Christ towards non-members by being “peaceful,” but they also desired for their message to be widely known and accepted. The SBC refrained from making clear-cut statements in the secular world because of their belief system, but the resolutions discussed in this section demonstrate that within the denomination there was an expectation that individuals should carry out what the SBC, because of their traditional doctrine, was not able to accomplish. The most prominent member to do that was Leon Macon. An analysis of his writings and reactions to the CRM reveals how the Southern Baptist denomination superseded their own condemnation against mingling politics and religion to present their ideology as divinely ordained and necessary in the public sphere.

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<sup>47</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955).

<sup>48</sup> SBC, Annual Report 1956, 72.

<sup>49</sup> SBC, Annual Report 1956, 72.

<sup>50</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 460.

<sup>51</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 460.

<sup>52</sup> SBC, Annual Report 1958, 39.

<sup>53</sup> SBC, Annual Report 1958, 39.

### Leon Macon's Righteous Politics

Newspapers were the primary mechanism through which people received information about the CRM and other topics; therefore, newspapers were crucial in presenting segregation as a moral crusade.<sup>54</sup> The most prominent newspaper for Southern Baptists in Alabama during this time period was the *Alabama Baptist*, a periodical with a circulation of approximately 106,000 subscribers in 1960.<sup>55</sup> The writings of Leon Macon, editor of the *Alabama Baptist* from 1950-1965, are essential to analyze because he accomplished what the SBC could not do on their own: he was overtly active in the political sphere.<sup>56</sup> Since the Southern Baptist denomination believed in a separation of church and state, the convention itself could not engage in political and largely secular activities. However, since Southern Baptists believed that a priesthood of believers was so important to this tradition, individuals could righteously speak out against integration in politics. Macon exhibited the success of this “loophole” in his writings on the of separation of church and state, the need for anti-communism, preventing outsider influence, and stopping sudden action in regards to integration.

As early as 1953 Macon was advocating for the preservation of segregation because he feared integration would lead to widespread immorality. He wrote, “Historic attitudes are passed down to oncoming generations. All of these inherited attitudes are not desired, but to break them off suddenly would do more harm than good ... There are many tedious things facing this generation, and generations to come, regarding the problem of minority groups.”<sup>57</sup> Macon claimed that great progress was being made in the South in regards to race relations and that conditions were better than before for minority groups. For him, more harm than good would occur if the current social construct was adjusted. However, Southern Baptists should still maintain a Christian attitude towards the situation because any rapid change could mirror the immorality preceding the great flood. Therefore, Macon argued that segregation must be preserved through love and respect for all people.

Immediately following the *Brown v. Board* (1954) ruling, Macon affirmed the need to protect Christians from the inevitable violence caused by integration. He argued that immediate action would cause significant harm to white people in the South so “caution must be exercised lest racial animosities create clashes and bloodshed.”<sup>58</sup> Christians still had an obligation to abide by the law even if it would cause massive panic in the region. Although Macon presents a passive stance here, he did become more vigilant about protecting segregation when it was determined that that integration be implemented “with all deliberate speed.”<sup>59</sup> As he wrote in 1956,

The nation, and the South in particular, is faced with a grave problem which is a result of the Supreme Court's decision ... It is the human factor which makes it very essential to not enter into hasty action in any direction. There are some things which can be accomplished better by some sudden action, there are other things which must occur gradually lest there be more damage done than good accomplished.<sup>60</sup>

Here again, Macon claims that the Supreme Court is the outside influence causing chaos and violence to erupt throughout the area. Abiding entirely by this statute, which would entail complete integration of public schools, from his perspective, would

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<sup>54</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 474.

<sup>55</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 474; Elizabeth Wells and Grace Thornton, *The Alabama Baptist: Celebrating 175 Years of Informing, Inspiring and Connecting Baptists*, 2017, 75.

<sup>56</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 474; Thornton and Wells, *The Alabama Baptist*, 75.

<sup>57</sup> Leon Macon, editorial, *Alabama Baptist*, June 25, 1953.

<sup>58</sup> Leon Macon, editorial, *Alabama Baptist*, May 27, 1954.

<sup>59</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 77-85.

<sup>60</sup> Leon Macon, editorial, *Alabama Baptist*, March 8, 1956.

ultimately result in the downfall of society. Since, according to Macon, humans were made for God's commands, they cannot fit perfectly into secular laws.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, he advised his readers to very slowly comply with the ruling's decrees to maintain peace while also remaining resolute on God's commands for Christians. His argument was incredibly persuasive during this time period as the *Alabama Baptist's* readership was constantly increasing during this time period.<sup>62</sup> Macon's writings reveal that the SBC had successfully inserted their moral crusade from a solely religious to a largely secular realm without ever formally entering the political sphere.

The Little Rock Central High School crisis of 1957 was another turning point for Macon and other Alabama Southern Baptists.<sup>63</sup> Macon became ever more vigilant in his attempts to circumvent integration, and he instituted several rhetorical strategies to accomplish his goals. Macon first tried to prevent the publication of integrationist literature as when the Woman's Missionary Union published literature written by African-Americans in an effort to pursue racial reconciliation. He claimed, "that no Scripture instructed Baptists to join reform movements or solve social problems."<sup>64</sup> Macon was concerned that the WMU, and other institutions like it, were causing people to question the validity of Southern Baptists' moral argument against integration. He did not want his hard work to be undone by more progressive female writers. Macon also argued that the true moral crusade was not the CRM but preserving segregation. He utilized the danger resulting from integration as evidence of this. He wrote, "We can see no reason why our churches should not be used to continue to educate young people in an atmosphere in which there is an absence of violence and contention," indicating that an improvement in racial relations cannot truly be an improvement if it puts white individuals in danger.<sup>65</sup> Macon clarified that "We have the kindest regards for all men but we cannot conscientiously sanction a procedure which will almost certainly result in chaos, violence and confusion."<sup>66</sup> Maintaining a Christian attitude towards those pursuing integration was necessary, but preserving segregation was equally essential in order to avoid undue harm to innocent Southern Baptists.

Macon placed himself entirely into the political sphere by 1964 when responding to President Lyndon B. Johnson's attempt to convince Southern Baptist clergy to promote integrationist legislation from their pulpits.<sup>67</sup> Macon began actively promoting non-compliance,

President Johnson evidently does not understand the position of Southern Baptists relative to making their pulpits political rostrums ... Those who are seeking to get this bill passed are appealing to the churches by calling it a moral issue ... The most objectionable features do not center around segregation and integration but around our basic freedoms and freedom of choice.<sup>68</sup>

Macon is again exhibiting his belief in a total separation of church and state. In addition, he is making it very clear that segregation is immoral. This is a viewpoint he has made very clear to his readers throughout his tenure, as he regularly reminded them that the chaos and violence invoked from forced segregation could not have possibly been moral. In the following years after this publication, Macon continued to condemn outsider influence on race relations, connecting the Civil Rights Movement

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<sup>61</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 461.

<sup>62</sup> Thornton and Wells, *The Alabama Baptist*, 72.

<sup>63</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 461.

<sup>64</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 462.

<sup>65</sup> Leon Macon, editorial, *Alabama Baptist*, February 20, 1958.

<sup>66</sup> Leon Macon, editorial, *Alabama Baptist*, February 26, 1959.

<sup>67</sup> Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 464.

<sup>68</sup> Leon Macon, editorial, *Alabama Baptist*, April 2, 1964.

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to communism and supporting George Wallace's stance after Selma.<sup>69</sup> The *Alabama Baptist* and Leon Macon were especially capable in stalling Civil Rights progress because they pushed this cause beyond the religious realm and appealed to the common man in a way that was righteous for Southern Baptists. As a result, Macon, and the rest of the SBC, became more vigilant in championing segregation as a moral crusade.

### Conclusion

During the 1960s, the United States was entirely divided over the moral and practical implications of demands for integration. The Southern Baptist Convention did not escape this turmoil; indeed Baptist structures and theologies were irrevocably transformed by their responses to these crises. By resisting the implementation of integration, the SBC re-interpreted what the central doctrines of church-state separation, local church autonomy, and the "priestly" insights of all could possibly mean. The focus on the individual acceptance of divinely given insights became in this period a way to manufacture widespread consent for segregation. Outright political statements remained outside the pale of the denomination as a whole, but SBC resolutions became instruments of spirit-led political involvement on the part of individual citizen-members, acting in harmony with church teaching but independently of direct denominational control. Strong "secular" leaders writing on behalf of Southern Baptist principles, but as individuals, righteously entered the political realm. Figures like Leon Macon and the "righteous cause" he defended were instrumental at stalling the integrationist efforts of African Americans, progressive Christians, and even the United States government.

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<sup>69</sup> Thornton and Wells, *The Alabama Baptist*, 85.

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