

**RACE AND EVANGELICALISM: L. NELSON BELL AND THE FIGHT FOR
CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIANITY, 1942-1973**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CWU	Church Women United
FCC	Federal Council of Churches in America
MRA	Mountain Retreat Association
NCC	National Council of Churches in America
PCUS	Presbyterian Church of the United States
YPCA	Young People's Council of the Assembly

ABSTRACT

RACE AND EVANGELICALISM: L. NELSON BELL AND THE FIGHT FOR CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIANITY, 1942-1973

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L. Nelson Bell was one of the most influential evangelicals in the United States during the post World War II and Civil Rights eras of the twentieth century. Bell was the father-in-law of famed evangelist Billy Graham, a twenty-five-year medical missionary to China and an enormously influential editor who fought for America's conservative Christian heritage. This study analyzes Bell's engagement with racial issues during his writing career, which stretched from 1942-1973. It details his paternalistic tendencies and his belief that individual Christian conversion, coupled with intentional acts of kindness between the races, could solve the nation's racial problems. Bell was either blind to or rejected the systemic nature of American racism and argued that personal and not structural change was the key to ending all of America's social dilemmas. He was an unshakeable defender of segregation and campaigned against interracial marriage. He believed in the God-ordained difference between the races, and that African Americans should earn social equality. Bell showed great personal concern for individual African Americans but used his platform to fight for racial barriers that would preserve the American color line. This study also details Bell's disagreements and even disdain for Martin Luther King Jr., his responses to the legal impact of *Brown v. Board of Education*, his perspectives on a lynching in Greenville, South Carolina, as well as his appreciation for baseball great, Jackie Robinson.

INTRODUCTION

On August 5, 1973, Calvin Thielman, the pastor of the Montreat Presbyterian Church, stood before a crowd of over 3,000 people at Anderson Auditorium in Montreat, North Carolina, to celebrate the life of one of the twentieth centuries most prominent evangelicals, L. Nelson Bell. During his eulogy, Thielman stated: “Dr. L. Nelson Bell was far and away the best-known and, I believe, the best loved Presbyterian layman in the whole world.”¹ Bell was a man of unlimited kindness, generosity, and love who possessed an unwavering and unashamed commitment to his beliefs. He was also a man with troubling flaws who struggled to see the contradictions that now define his legacy. Between 1942 and 1973, Bell’s commitment to racial segregation and opposition to the grassroots efforts for racial justice revealed a tangible conflict between his devotion to the nation’s established racial order and the burgeoning call for civil rights.

Bell’s considerable impact on the American religious landscape began long before his more famous son-in-law, the Reverend Billy Graham, married Bell’s daughter, Ruth. When Graham was just twenty-two years old and a student at Wheaton College, he watched his future father-in-law speak for the first time. Bell gave the main address at the 1942 World Mission Conference hosted by the Southern Presbyterian Church. Graham observed, “He was so well-known in the church that the auditorium was packed to hear him... He just started right out on the gospel, and he spoke with

¹ John Pollock, *A Foreign Devil in China* (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1971), 334.

such force and such power and such authority that I immediately realized that here was a great man, with courage and boldness.”² In the foreword to Bell’s biography, *A Foreign Devil in China*, Graham wrote, “Nelson Bell, as much as any Christian I have ever known, had a single-minded commitment to Christ and a determination to be guided by His Word, the Bible.”³

Few evangelicals in the middle decades of the twentieth century were as renowned as Bell. He was respected and beloved by many in the white evangelical community but he also had a fair share of detractors. His twenty-five-year career as a medical missionary in China and his award-winning work as a conservative evangelical editorialist offered him a sizable platform in the circles of American Protestantism. Bell’s columns, speaking engagements, and leadership in the Southern Presbyterian Church provided him with a broad sphere of influence, particularly within the white Southern evangelical community. However, his intimate association with Billy Graham heightened that influence and connected him with some of the most influential people in American politics, industry, and philanthropy. Bell was gracious and mild-mannered but also stern and forthright when advocating for social and political issues that were important to his theological worldview. His deep and abiding religious conviction directed all aspects of his life, and his relentless work ethic rarely wavered even in his final days.⁴

² Pollock, *A Foreign Devil in China*, 295.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ David E. Kucharsky, “The Urgent Gentleman,” *Christianity Today* vol. 17, no. 23 (August 31, 1973): 7; “Dr. L. Nelson Bell Dies at Age of 79,” *The Asheville Citizen Times*, (August 3, 1973). Bell was the recipient of six different awards from the Foundation of Valley Forge and in 1956 he won the top award for best editorial of the year.

Studying the scope of Bell's religious, political, and social beliefs is daunting. He wrote hundreds, if not thousands of editorials and articles from 1942-1973. The sheer volume of Bell's work represented his tireless efforts to express conservative evangelical religious, social, and political views to his readership. During this time frame, Bell articulated his thoughts on a range of issues in American life. He wrote extensively about the Christian faith but never shied away from tackling the broad societal issues of his day. For example, he launched a longstanding campaign against communism during the Cold War and Vietnam. Bell also addressed growing concern over the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in American politics during John F. Kennedy's rise to the presidency, and he engaged in a crusade against the evils of alcohol that stretched his entire writing career. Bell wrote extensively about the racial problems that gripped American society during the postwar years, including topics like segregation and civil rights. This study will examine Bell's relationship with racial ideologies from World War II through the Civil Rights Movement. It will reveal his feelings on events such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, the police brutality in Birmingham in 1963, and his response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968.

At its core, this study argues that Bell's relentless commitment to theological, social, and political conservatism undergirded by a foundational commitment to his version of white supremacy, prohibited him from fully recognizing the nation's growing demands for racial equality. Three sub-arguments thread throughout this analysis. First, Bell believed that God established differences between the races and, more significantly, that God mandated racial purity. This belief drove Bell's insistence that

interracial marriage was the greatest threat to what he believed was God's design for racial order. Secondly, Bell thought that the singular focus of the Church should be the proliferation of religious conversions and that any meaningful attention given by the Church to social matters was a harmful distraction from its true purpose. This stance enabled Bell to separate himself from the responsibility of racial reconciliation and allowed him to criticize religious leaders who actively engaged in matters of social justice. Finally, either consciously or subconsciously, Bell turned a blind eye to the more profound and structural nature of racism and believed that there was a simple twofold solution to racial conflict in America: religious conversions and an overabundance of individual kindness. On a more personal level, Bell's paternalistic tendencies clouded his interaction with African Americans and devalued their calls for racial justice.

Based on Bell's affable persona, labeling him as a white supremacist appears jarring because his version of white supremacy did not resonate with the violent, hate-filled version commonly expressed by the KKK and found in other vitriolic representations. In a letter Bell penned in 1956 he even expressed his disdain for the discriminating signs commonly seen in the Jim Crow South that prohibited African Americans from certain areas.⁵ Bell did not fit the mold of the more abrasive and recognizable manifestations of white supremacy but he viewed racial matters through a foundational lens of African American inferiority. He was a well-meaning, and charitable

⁵ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Cameron Fair, March 28, 1956, Box 24, Folder 25, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton (IL).

man but his subtle yet discernable beliefs in the tenets of white supremacy shaped his relationship with race.

In 1965, during the height of the Civil Rights movement, political historian Arthur Schlesinger described a racial viewpoint that represented many white Americans. He wrote, “historians of the Twenty-First Century will no doubt struggle to explain how nine-tenths of the American people, priding themselves every day on their kindness, their generosity, their historic consecration to the rights of man, could so long have connived in the systematic dehumanization of the remaining tenth – and could have done so without not just a second but hardly a first thought.”⁶ Bell’s racial perspective echoed all too well with Schlesinger’s description. In the decades following World War II, Bell’s beliefs on race illuminate the type of tension that permeated throughout much of the South and reflects the deep-seated racism found within the white evangelical community.

Lemuel Nelson Bell was born on July 30, 1894, into a devout Presbyterian household of Scotch-Irish descent. He grew up in Waynesboro, Virginia, where his father operated a store that sold shirts, hunting clothes, coats, and caps. Eventually, his father’s business expanded into four different states and provided the Bell family with a comfortable lifestyle. At the age of eleven, Bell responded to an altar call in an

⁶ Alfred Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 924.

evangelistic service at the First Presbyterian Church of Waynesboro, making an open and personal conversion to Christianity. From that point forward, Bell's faith wove throughout every facet of his life.⁷

In the fall of 1911, Bell enrolled at Washington and Lee College in Lexington, Virginia. He initially majored in pre-law but had a change of heart one evening during a conversation with a friend. Bell knew that a life of Christian service was in his future but was unclear as to what that precisely entailed. The missionary field intrigued Bell, but he assumed that only ordained ministers could be career missionaries. Bell's friend suggested that he become a medical missionary, and from that moment on, Bell had an unmistakable peace about his future. After that conversation, Bell recalled, "That very instant I knew what God wanted me to do. This wasn't a thing of days after. It was just as clear as if I heard God speaking in audible tones, 'That's what I want you to do.' It was as sudden as a light striking through a cloudy sky."⁸

After completing a year of pre-med requirements at Washington and Lee, Bell transferred to the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond to begin medical school. At the time of Bell's medical training, the study of eugenics was a prevalent and growing field of inquiry for academics and scientists. Many American universities, including institutions like Harvard, Cornell, Northwestern, and Columbia, offered well-attended courses in eugenics.⁹ The University of Virginia at Charlottesville was a leading academic proponent of race science. Paul Barringer, the dean of the medical school at

⁷ Pollock, *A Foreign Devil in China*, 23, 28, 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹ Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 69.

the University of Virginia, believed firmly in the inherently inferior biological nature of African Americans and that the mere presence of African Americans could threaten to destroy the “superior civilization” of white America.¹⁰ In the 1910s, the nation’s medical and academic communities were swayed heavily by the study of eugenics and, in turn, the belief in African American inferiority.¹¹

After finishing his medical degree in 1916, Bell boarded a ship with his young wife, Virginia, en route to the eastern Chinese province of Northern Kiangsu.¹² There he spent the better part of twenty-five years serving the medical and spiritual needs of the Chinese people who crossed his path. In May of 1941, Nelson and Virginia returned to America after Virginia contracted malaria. Bell could not accurately care for her in China but hoped to return once his wife regained her health. After arriving, Bell had an appointment at the U.S. State Department in Washington, D.C. He warned the government of the growing tension in China and the ever-increasing danger of the Japanese military.¹³

Bell understood the threat of Japanese aggression firsthand. On August 13, 1937, the Japanese invaded Shanghai. Four days later, the bombings reached Bell’s home in Tsingkiangpu, present-day Qingjiangpu, but the invasion did not deter Bell and his calling to serve the Chinese people. He ignored the United States evacuation policy and continued to perform surgeries despite the bombings. Bell’s biographer, John

¹⁰ Gregory Michael Door, *Segregation’s Science: Eugenics and Society in Virginia* (Charlottesville, VA: The University of Virginia Press, 2008), 44-46.

¹¹ I was unable to locate any correspondences, notes or editorials where Bell specifically mentioned any courses he took on eugenics or thoughts on the specific science of race. However, Bell certainly would have encountered studies in eugenics while completing a medical degree in 1916 in the state of Virginia.

¹² Billy Graham, *Just As I Am* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1997), 85.

¹³ Pollock, *A Foreign Devil in China*, 287, 294; Graham, *Just As I Am*, 90.

Pollock, described Bell's determination and steady hand in the face of mounting threats. He wrote, "routine surgery was now performed early in the morning since bombers had never arrived before nine, but he was often in the middle of an emergency operation when he heard the drone of approaching planes. The operation could not stop... all the senior staff, felt a little braver when near Nelson."¹⁴

Bell was keenly aware of the capacity within the Japanese military to commit unspeakable acts of atrocity. He lived roughly 100 miles North of Nanking, where in December of 1937, the Japanese army embarked on a six-week campaign of rape and murder.¹⁵ In May of 1938, air raids struck the inner wall of Tsingkiangpu, killing many and sending the wounded to Bell's hospital. Bell performed amputations and provided whatever care he could to those injured. After the Japanese took control of Tsingkiangpu in early 1939, Bell had the unfortunate responsibility of reporting numerous rapes of Chinese women by Japanese soldiers to the top Japanese military officials. One night, Japanese soldiers raped a woman and bayoneted her husband to death just outside the gate of Bell's hospital.¹⁶ Unfortunately, Bell's warning at the State Department in the summer of 1941 went unheeded as the high ranking United States government officials with whom Bell spoke, dismissed any impending Japanese threat to American interests.¹⁷

After their 1941 return to the United States, Virginia recovered from her illness, and the Bells moved to their newly purchased home in Montreat, North Carolina,

¹⁴ Pollock, *A Foreign Devil in China*, 247.

¹⁵ For information about the tragedy in Nanking the author of this study referenced the following book: Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

¹⁶ Pollock, *A Foreign Devil in China*, 252, 266.

¹⁷ Graham, *Just As I Am*, 90.

located just outside of Asheville. Montreat was the hub of Southern Presbyterian life and home to the denomination's conference center. Bell opened a highly successful surgical practice in the area and quickly became a well-respected member of the greater Asheville community. He also became more connected with the broader network of the Southern Presbyterian Church. Bell was well known for his experience on the mission field, but his return to the States significantly increased his profile within the denomination. He joined the World Mission Board, served on the Board of Directors for the conference center as well as Montreat College, and became an elder at the Montreat Presbyterian Church.¹⁸

In 1943, Bell began his long and distinguished writing career when he jointly launched *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* with a fellow advocate of theological conservatism, Henry Dendy. The *Journal* primarily reached a readership base within Bell's denomination, but his platform grew significantly in 1956 when the first edition of *Christianity Today* rolled off the presses. Alongside his son-in-law, Billy Graham, and the philanthropic giant, Howard Pew, *Christianity Today* reached a nation-wide, evangelical audience.

Due to health concerns, Bell retired from his medical practice in 1955. During his surgical career in Asheville, Bell had the opportunity to assist people from all segments of the local community. He treated the poor and rich alike, often refusing to accept payment from Asheville's poorest residents. He also served members of Asheville's African American community. According to John Pollock, the black community in

¹⁸ Pollock, *A Foreign Devil in China*, 296, 297, 301, 312.

Asheville respected Bell for his kindness towards them. Bell refused to “follow the southern custom of treating blacks only after whites. Each took his turn.” Pollock recalled the story of Bell traveling to the Piedmont region of North Carolina after receiving a phone call from a social worker who lived there. Children in the area were not receiving the kind of medical care they needed, and Bell acted swiftly. He took his surgical nurses on the road with him, held clinics removing tonsils, and assisted with other medical needs of the black children in the area.¹⁹

A deep sense of paternalism defined Bell’s care and concern for African Americans. He desired for their well-being but wanted to ensure societal limitations that ultimately struck at their autonomy and self-determination. Bell’s perception of black Americans was a study in contrast. He recognized the discrimination and humiliation that generations of white Americans inflicted upon their black neighbors, but, at the same time, he rationalized the need to maintain discriminatory beliefs in areas like social segregation and interracial marriage. Bell did not see a disconnect in his paternalistic logic, but instead, believed that segregationist practices were ultimately the solution to ensuring the betterment of African Americans. He also continued to maintain a firm commitment to the concept of racial purity, which put him at odds with a growing number of scientists and medical professionals. In the years following World War II, the American scientific community cemented the already growing charge to discredit the study of eugenics. The horrors of Hitler’s policies in Germany eradicated any legitimate belief in the science of racial purity. For the mainstream American scientist, the concept of racial purity did not meet modern standards of scientific evidence, and it was

¹⁹ Pollock, *A Foreign Devil in China*, 296, 309, 333.

politically viewed as inherently undemocratic and, therefore, out of step with American society.²⁰ For Bell, that change did not matter.

Dissecting Bell's beliefs on race hinge on understanding his staunch adherence to the principles of racial conservatism and his version of white supremacy. In his book, *A Rage For Order*, Joel Williamson stated that "conservatism always began, proceeded and ended upon the assumption of Negro inferiority." He traced racial conservative thought in the South back to the 1830s and indicated that its stubborn persistency stretched virtually unchanged throughout the nineteenth century and into the modern-day.²¹

Religious historian George Marsden linked religious conservatism directly with cultural conservatism, particularly in Bell's native South. Marsden wrote that "the preservation of evangelical religion went hand in hand with the preservation of the Southern way of life."²² For Bell, conservatism foundationally demonstrated itself through his unwavering commitment to the Christian faith but was also exhibited in his reactions to the social and political movements of his day. During Bell's writing career, he considered himself first and foremost a "conservative evangelical." Throughout the twentieth century, different shades of evangelicals, including fundamentalist and more socially progressive evangelicals, formed subgroups underneath the diverse umbrella of evangelicalism. Evangelicals stretched across multiple denominations, with the largest

²⁰ Peggy Pascoe, *When Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 200.

²¹ Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 71.

²² George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 179.

share coming from the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches but also included groups ranging from Pentecostals to Mennonites.²³

Evangelicals during Bell's era shared several characteristics that defined the group's foundational theology. At the core of those beliefs were two principles that united them across denominational lines. First, they believed firmly in the enormous significance of "evangelizing" and individual religious conversions. The concept of being "born again" and "saving souls" was central to evangelicalism. A second core evangelical belief was that the Bible served as the ultimate source of authority for truth. Evangelicals rejected the notion that the Bible played a secondary role to human reason.²⁴ To understand Bell's place within the religious context of American society as well as to grasp his conservative relationship with racial ideologies, it is essential to detail the development of conservative evangelicalism in American culture.

During the antebellum period of American history, the Second Great Awakening shaped the religious landscape in new ways. A wave of religious populism, empowered by charismatic leaders, rebuffed the nation's high church culture. Nathan Hatch described how the Second Great Awakening democratized American Christianity by empowering the poor and offering them a sense of individual self-respect and collective

²³ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 235.

²⁴ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3; Bell used the term biblical literalism when describing his core understanding of biblical interpretation. He died in 1973, five years before The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy was crafted. Roughly 200 evangelical leaders gathered for the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in Chicago and agreed upon an eight-page document that detailed their definition of Biblical inerrancy. However, even within the evangelical community there were critiques of the statement. It is possible that Bell would have signed off on the statement particularly the portion that reads, "Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority." For the purposes of this study I will attempt to simplify the terminology around the Bible and use the phrase "ultimate source of authority" when addressing the importance of the Bible to evangelicals.

self-confidence. He argued that the emerging religious leaders of the early republic and antebellum era brought Christianity to the rank and file members of society and “embraced them without regard to social standing; and challenged them to think, to interpret Scripture, and to organize the church for themselves.” Religious populism reflected the revolutionary spirit in the early decades of the United States and relied on revivalist methods to bring evangelical conversions to the masses.²⁵

Evangelicalism was the dominant force in American Protestantism throughout most of the nineteenth century. “Soul-winning” projects like the revivals of the Second Great Awakening and those in the Civil War military camps were the types of revivalist endeavors carried out by evangelical leaders. Estimates are that between 100,000 and 200,000 Civil War soldiers converted to Christianity during the conflict.²⁶ As the century progressed through Reconstruction and into the Gilded Age, a new leader of evangelicalism emerged.

Dwight L. Moody spearheaded American evangelicalism in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The Chicago based preacher built an evangelical empire, specifically developing structures, like schools and summer conferences geared toward training America’s youth in the course of evangelicalism. Moody usually avoided the overly controversial topics of his day and focused instead on the vital significance of the individual's need to conquer personal sins through saving faith in Christ. Those who made overcoming sin the singular focus of Christianity viewed the Christian community as a place where the individual could receive emotional support and encouragement,

²⁵ Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 4-7.

²⁶ Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 675, 677.

but the collective nature of the Church or its community was secondary to the individual. For Moody, proper theology was less important than the individual's need to conquer sin. As his career progressed, Moody held a growing belief that the direct involvement of the Church in social matters threatened the primary directive of evangelism. Like Bell and evangelicals of the twentieth century, Moody felt that the change of heart that came with conversion was the only long-lasting solution to the world's social ills.²⁷

During the final few decades of the nineteenth-century, evangelicalism experienced a significant challenge to its predominance in American religious society. Emerging paradigms in the philosophical movements of the eighteenth century and the birth of nascent scientific theories in the nineteenth century forced Christian scholars to engage in a new defense of the relevancy of faith. These challenges to western religion at large disrupted the theological assuredness of the Protestant Church as biblical scholars attempted to salvage Christianity from modern philosophical and scientific attacks.²⁸

The foundations for this challenge to evangelicalism first appeared a century before when the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, shook the religious establishment when he and others began advocating that human reason should replace divine revelation. A crisis ensued in the Christian Church as biblical scholars scrambled to reclaim Christianity from secular rationalism. A new focus on biblical criticism matched the type of Enlightenment inquiry that accompanied other areas like politics and economics. Liberal religious scholars challenged the ultimate authority of the Bible,

²⁷ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 34-37.

²⁸ Mark Taylor Dalhouse, *An Island in the Lake of Fire: Bob Jones University, Fundamentalism and the Separateness Movement* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 12.

and as a result, new interpretations began to emerge that sought to align the Bible with Enlightenment philosophy.²⁹

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin's book, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, posed a significant threat to Christianity. Just as the Enlightenment challenged Christianity the century before, Darwin launched a scientific revolution that demanded a response from Christian theology. Darwin's theory of natural selection disputed the notion of a world dictated by divine order. It argued that the world operated through "natural" and evolutionary processes that did not include a supernatural God. Darwin believed that science should not celebrate a world dictated by God's design, but instead, that randomness best defined the natural world. Faced with competing views of man's origins, segments of the Protestant Church began to reevaluate their theology to come to grips with the scientific wave crashing on Christianity's shores.³⁰

In the wake of Darwin's discoveries, some theologians began to interpret the Bible through the lens of both higher criticism and natural selection. These "Liberal Protestants" were anxious not to abandon Christianity but make it accessible to modern man and applicable to the ever-increasing industrialized and urbanized population. The liberal Protestant version of Christianity rejected much of the tenets found within the evangelical version of Christianity. Liberals no longer held to the concept that the Bible was the ultimate source of authority, nor did they believe in divine supernatural acts. Liberals found that evangelicalism was outdated when viewed under the light of

²⁹ Dalhouse, *An Island in the Lake of Fire*, 12-14.

³⁰ Mark Noll, *Protestants in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 89-90. Dalhouse, *An Island in the Lake of Fire*, 14-15.

Enlightenment and scientific revelations. In his mammoth work entitled *A Religious History of the American People*, Sydney Ahlstrom wrote that “liberals led the Protestant churches into the world of modern science, scholarship, philosophy and global knowledge. They domesticated religious ideas. They forced confrontation between traditional orthodoxies and the new grounds for religious skepticism exposed during the nineteenth century, and thus carried forward what the Enlightenment had begun.”³¹

In the decades following the Civil War, the growth of industrialization and urbanization altered the dynamic of American society. As the population in the cities grew, new challenges emerged. Social issues such as poverty, the rights of workers, slum housing, and racial bitterness infiltrated American cities. The Social Gospel movement emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century as an attempt to deal with the growing problems. The foundation of the Social Gospel had evangelical roots as Christian abolitionists in the years before the Civil War asserted that slavery was evil by nature and had a structural hold upon America.³²

As the twentieth century loomed, it was liberal theology that supported the Social Gospel movement. Historian Robert Handy argued that “the spokesman for the social gospel expected that, through the efforts of men of good will, the kingdom of God would soon become a reality, bringing with it social harmony and the elimination of the worst of social injustices.” Hardy also indicated that many followers of the Social Gospel were frustrated by religious conservatives and their lack of interest in or opposition to social change. He wrote: “Convinced that they were right, and troubled by what they could

³¹ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 783; Dalhouse, *An Island in the Lake of Fire*, 15.

³² Ronald C. White, Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1976), 6, 15.

see only as stubborn conservatism, [spokesmen for the Social Gospel] assailed those who resisted change in church and society.”³³

One of the foremost innovators of the Social Gospel in the twentieth century was Walter Rauschenbusch. The son of a German immigrant, Rauschenbusch was a seminary professor who, between 1886 and 1897, served a German Baptist church in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of New York. Early on in his ministry, Rauschenbusch implemented an evangelical strategy designed to “save souls,” but quickly realized that the social demands of the neighborhood were too overwhelming only to offer the prospect of individual conversion.³⁴ His work with the poor and disenfranchised in Hell’s Kitchen drove his belief that service to the poor was a critical and essential part of his Christian faith. In his 1907 book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, Rauschenbusch laid the foundation for the Social Gospel, which opposed Moody’s evangelical view that the Church should remain separate from active engagement with the social ills of society. From Rauschenbusch’s perspective, the industrialization and urbanization of American society exacerbated the plight of the poor and drove the need for social action.³⁵ The contempt for poverty defined the movement. As bread lines formed around the nation’s cities, growing inequality between the prosperous and the poor became commonplace.³⁶

Social Gospel adherents believed that social intervention and campaigns for social justice were a moral responsibility of the Christian Church. During the twentieth

³³ Robert T. Handy, *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 10.

³⁴ White and Hopkins, *The Social Gospel*, xv.

³⁵ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 801.

³⁶ Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940), 11.

century, this principle of the Social Gospel often drew sharp criticism from the evangelical branch of American Protestantism. The liberal theology that directed the Social Gospel challenged the fundamental components of evangelicalism, arguing that the “kingdom of God” could reign on earth and believed that the nation’s social problems would one day come to an end.³⁷ The height of the Social Gospel movement took place during the first two decades of the twentieth century, but as a new decade began, theological conservatives sought to reassert their belief in the fundamental principles of evangelical Christianity.

The fundamentalist movement began at large during the 1920s. One of the leaders of fundamentalism was the academic, J. Gresham Machen. As the professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, Machen railed against modernism and its threats to authentic Christianity. In 1923 Machen published *Christianity & Liberalism*, which argued that “modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions.” Machen believed that the attempts by Protestant liberals to reconcile Christianity with modern science relinquished everything essential to Christianity. He wrote, “In trying to remove from Christianity everything that could possibly be objected to in the name of science, in trying to bribe off the enemy by those concessions which the enemy most desires, the apologist has really abandoned what he started out to defend.”³⁸ Fundamentalists, like Machen, believed that the higher criticism approach to biblical studies employed by

³⁷ Handy, *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920*, 10.

³⁸ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism* (Louisville, KY: GLH Publishing, 2019), 5-6.

Protestant liberals watered down the Bible to the point that the basic tenets of the Christian faith no longer existed.

Adherents to fundamentalism rejected the theologically liberal interpretation of Scripture and continued to hold firmly to their belief that the Bible was the ultimate source of authority. In his book, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, George Marsden laid out the long history of the fundamentalist movement in the United States and its origins as a militant response to liberal Protestantism. Fundamentalists in the twentieth century were evangelical Christians that shared similar theological beliefs as the religious populists of the antebellum era and with D.L. Moody at the close of the nineteenth century. The fundamentalist opposed modernism in favor of traditional evangelical views. Marsden argued that revivalism and pietism were the centerpieces of fundamentalism and that they “tended toward individualistic, culture-denying, soul-rescuing Christianity.”³⁹

Bell’s theological beliefs fit securely within the context of Marsden’s characterization of fundamentalism. Before World War II, Bell would have considered himself a “fundamentalist.” However, the semantics of evangelicalism changed during the middle portion of the twentieth century. In the 1940s, “neo-evangelicals” emerged as critics of the hardline stances held by fundamentalists. This new batch of evangelicals stepped back from the separateness nature of fundamentalism and

³⁹ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 7.

desired a greater engagement with society.⁴⁰ The leader of this new evangelical push was Bell's son-in-law, Billy Graham.

During the 1950s, Graham began hosting his enormously popular crusades and reaching broad audiences with his message. He strategically included Protestant liberal organizations and churches in the planning process to widen the effectiveness of his "soul-winning" initiatives. Graham never relented his core evangelical beliefs, but he did coordinate and work closely with Protestant liberals on many occasions.⁴¹

High profile fundamentalists like Carl McIntire, John R. Rice, and Bob Jones, Sr., began attacking Graham for his relationship with Protestant liberals. Many of these combative fundamentalists believed in complete separation from those who shared opposing theological views and objected strongly to Graham's more ecumenical spirit. Despite theological differences with Protestant liberals, Graham was more than willing to coordinate crusades and other events with them if it meant that he could bring his message of salvation to a broader audience. As a result of the contentious nature of these evangelical rifts, less militant evangelicals, or those more interested in reaching society at large with their evangelistic message distinguished themselves from the more outspoken and antagonistic fundamentalist wing. The dividing line of the 1950s saw the more militant and separate focused evangelicals hold on to the term "fundamentalist."

⁴⁰ Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 7.

⁴¹ In 1957, Billy Graham held a crusade in New York City. He worked closely with a wide range of groups including Jewish and Roman Catholic Groups. McIntire, Rice and Jones Sr. attacked Graham for his coordination with the liberal affiliated group called the Protestant Council of New York Churches. It was also at this crusade that Martin Luther King Jr. offered an opening prayer and joined Graham and his team for a discussion of the racial situation in America. For more information about the New York Crusade see Graham autobiography: Billy Graham, *Just As I Am*, 350-383.

Those who were more interested in influencing society with the evangelical message but who still opposed Protestant liberal theology became “neo-evangelicals” or, to use Bell’s term, “conservative evangelicals.” Despite their differences, fundamentalist and conservative evangelicals maintained the shared theological views of the authority of the Bible and the imperative of individual conversions.⁴² It is important to note that in the years following World War II, that all fundamentalists would have considered themselves evangelicals, but not all evangelicals would have identified as fundamentalists.

Bell’s theology was not only rooted in the principles of conservative evangelicalism, but it also was rooted in place. His Southern religious, social, and political heritage shaped his racial perspective. As a lifelong member of the Southern Presbyterian Church, Bell experienced the South and all its racial struggles through the lens of his evangelical denomination. Presbyterians, like the Baptists and Methodists, were united in the decades before the Civil War, but the white South’s resolute commitment to slavery split the denominations across sectional lines as tensions over the Southern institution grew.⁴³ In 1890 there were roughly 190,000 Presbyterians in the United States serving as the third-largest evangelical denomination in the country following only the Baptists and Methodists. Unlike the Baptists and Methodists who were highly influential during the Second Great Awakening at reaching out to the poor and African Americans, the Presbyterians had a disproportionate number of members who were apart of the more socially prominent class. In the years after the Civil War,

⁴² Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 232-236.

⁴³ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 659-665.

approximately 14,000 black members of the Southern Presbyterian Church moved to different denominations.⁴⁴

Religious historian, Sydney E. Ahlstrom, argued that the Southern Presbyterian Church became “the prime embodiment of the white establishment in the New South.” Southern Presbyterians were often members of the managerial class, leaving lower class members of society to other denominations.⁴⁵ It was this middle and upper-class component of the Southern Presbyterian Church in the final decades of the nineteenth century that crafted what Presbyterian historian, Ernest Trice Thompson called the “spirituality of the church.” Many influential Southern Presbyterians, in the years between Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement, adhered to the basic premise of the “spirituality of the church.” The concept combined the belief in the predominance of individual conversion with the notion that the Church should formally remove itself from social concerns.⁴⁶ Thompson’s concept of the “spirituality of the church” resonated closely with the argument made by Samuel S. Hill in his 1966 book *Southern Churches in Crises*.

Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterians from the South had a long tradition of ignoring the nation’s social problems. Hill had a deep connection with Southern religion. He was an ordained Southern Baptist minister but also a highly respected academic who, at the time of his book’s publication, served as the Chairman of the Religion Department at the University of North Carolina. Hill viewed Southern Christians as entrenched in their old attitudes and practices and was critical of their belief in societal

⁴⁴ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 716.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 726.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

health through individual religious life.⁴⁷ He pointed to the Southern church and what he described as its “central theme,” which he defined as a “mandate to convert the lost.” It is this mandate, Hill argued, that drove Southern churches to focus solely on an individual’s conversion and neglect society’s social ills.⁴⁸

Hill focused explicitly on civil rights, and the Southern church’s often passive cooperation in maintaining the racial status quo. He wrote, “The apparent indifference of regional religious groups toward the current civil rights struggle in the South is found to be consistent with the general evangelical stance, which does not view responsibility toward God or man in the light of a social ethic.” He continued to argue that “the white Christian’s duty toward the Negro, as seen by the southern church, is to convert him and befriend him (in a paternal framework), not to consider altering the social traditions and arrangements which govern his (and everyone else’s) life to a significant degree.”⁴⁹

Hill’s critique of the Southern Church during the midst of the Civil Rights Movement served as a challenge to conservative evangelicals to step out of their church building and become intentional about engaging the social issues of the day. Otherwise, Hill argued, the Church would lose its relevancy. Throughout his life, Bell consistently refuted the type of argument that Hill presented. One of Bell’s clearest rebuttals to Hill’s line of thinking came in an editorial Bell penned in 1951. Writing on behalf of himself and the *Journal* he stated: “It is our strong conviction that if the primary emphasis of Christian preaching is placed on the conversion and redemption of the individual that the social inadequacies, injustices and other problems will be tackled and

⁴⁷ Samuel S. Hill Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis* (New York: Holy, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), xi-xii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

met by these 'saved souls.'⁵⁰ Although I found no proof of correspondence between Hill and Bell or that the two were even familiar with each other, Hill's description of Southern Christians reverberates with the basic premises of Bell's beliefs on race and other social matters.

In his book, *Race and Religion*, Presbyterian historian Joel Alvis expanded on the arguments presented by Thompson and Hill. He wrote, "the spirituality of the church came to be a primary defense for [Southern Presbyterians] in every aspect of its operation. Simply put, this doctrine affirmed a dualism between affairs of the world and affairs of the spirit."⁵¹ Alvis wrote specifically about Bell's racial and social views as well as the publication which Bell served as editor, *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*. Alvis stated that Bell and the other writers for the *Journal* "believed that personal salvation was the preeminent concern of the church and that liberalism was a destructive force based on theological dishonesty which confused generosity with the Gospel."⁵²

Understanding the relationship that white Southern Presbyterians had with race is an essential component of this study but because of Bell's limited and primarily paternalistic relationship with African Americans, this work is mostly absent of black voices. Ernest Trice Thompson, who was both a contemporary and frequent combatant with Bell, wrote extensively about the troubled relationship Southern Presbyterians had with African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. He argued that many of his fellow white Southern Presbyterians believed fervently in the

⁵⁰ L. Nelson Bell, "Saving Souls," *Southern Presbyterian Journal* 10, no. 21 (September 19, 1951): 4-5.

⁵¹ Joel L. Alvis Jr., *Race & Religion: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 51.

premise of segregation. He described a condition in the Jim Crow South where “the triumph of racism, enforced by law, sanctioned by religion, supported by custom, and if needed, by social ostracism was complete.”⁵³

Thompson also described a Southern culture in which most white people of faith agreed. He argued that most believed that “the Southern white man... was the Negro’s best friend, and there was a naïve assumption that the Negro, stripped of political power, could rely upon the unselfishness of the whites to see that his real welfare would not be neglected.” Thompson pinpoints the paternalism of many Southern Presbyterians as a defining aspect of their social and racial perspective. His description of Southern paternalism accurately represents Bell’s position.⁵⁴

Thompson also illustrated some of the reasons that Southern Presbyterians believed that African Americans were inferior to whites. In 1904, the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Winston Salem, North Carolina, D. Clay Lilly, stated that the black man “is not equal to the white man, either mentally or morally.”⁵⁵ In a speech in Montreat, North Carolina, a Presbyterian pastor from Louisville, Rev. Egbert W. Smith, argued that the “science of ethology puts the white race at the top, the black race at the bottom, of the five great divisions of mankind.”⁵⁶ Smith’s words invoked the language of eugenics and showed that many Southern Presbyterians believed in the biological inferiority of African Americans. Combine these denominational claims on race with the

⁵³ Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South Volume Three: 1890-1972* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1973) 251.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁵⁵ Cited in Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South Volume Three: 1890-1972*, 258.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

popularity of “race science” in the Virginia medical community and the foundations of Bell’s belief on race shift into focus.

Because of beliefs in the biological inferiority of African Americans, Southern Presbyterians were deeply concerned about the prospects of interracial marriage.⁵⁷ This fear was particularly astute in Bell’s life. In her book, *What Comes Naturally*, Peggy Pascoe analyzes miscegenation laws and how those laws helped shape the American racial landscape. She wrote that “the more natural opposition to interracial marriage seemed, the easier it was for it to serve as the bottom line of white supremacy and the most commonsense justification for all other forms of race discrimination.” Like many southern whites, Bell viewed interracial marriage as unnatural, and this foundational perspective directed his views on racial segregation. Interracial marriage garnered nearly unanimous opposition amongst whites from the end of the Civil War through the 1960s.⁵⁸

Thompson argued that many Southern Presbyterians noticed the superior attainments of some African Americans like Booker T. Washington but explained those men away because of the “infusion of white blood.” Thompson contended that Southern churchmen feared that social equality would “lead to the amalgamation of the two races and that this spelled the end of the Southern culture.” In the early twentieth century, the vast majority of Southern Presbyterians opposed racial mixing in churches, in schools, and social intermingling of any kind. In this time frame, the prevailing view of Southern Presbyterians was that segregation was essential to preserving not only the

⁵⁷ Alvis, *Race and Religion*, 52.

⁵⁸ Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* 1-2.

Southern way of life but also racial purity. During Bell's formative years, the outliers of white Southern society were those who believed in the end of segregation and the equality of the races.⁵⁹

The racial and social status quo of Southern Presbyterianism came under fire beginning in the 1910s. Union Theological Seminary professor Walter Lingle read Walter Rauschenbusch's book on the Social Gospel, and those views began to revolutionize Lingle and eventually his Church. Lingle, who had close ties to the Montreat community, read and reread *Christianity and the Social Crisis* and became an avid proponent of instituting the tenets of the Social Gospel within his denomination. He began with teaching a course at Union on Christian social ethics; the first such course ever offered at any Southern Presbyterian Seminary. Lingle started training young ministers in the concepts of the Social Gospel. Over the next several decades, the prevailing sentiments in support of segregation and belief in the biological inferiority of African Americans came under fire. Some Presbyterians like Lingle and Ernest Trice Thompson managed to hold firm to the core teachings of evangelicalism, such as the belief in the ultimate authority of the Bible and the importance of personal conversion, while simultaneously promoting the need for a radical rethinking of the denomination's stance on segregation and the Church's role in social activism.⁶⁰

This study will follow Bell's view on race through a chronological analysis. It will show how little Bell's belief on race evolved throughout his thirty-year editorial career and how he adapted those beliefs to fit within the political and social atmosphere of the

⁵⁹ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South: Volume Three*, 257.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 265.

time. The first chapter will begin with his editorial career in 1942 and stretch through 1953. This section will focus on Bell's biblical defense of segregation as well as his interactions with racial matters throughout the period. The second chapter will analyze Brown's views on race, beginning with his reaction to the *Brown v. Board* decision and his contention that despite the end of segregation in public spaces, the personal choice of social segregation was both justifiable and preferable. The final chapter will address Bell's disagreements with the methods of the Civil Rights Movement and his responses to many of the events and leaders that defined that era.

Bell's writings drive the course of this study. His thirty plus years of editorials, first in the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* and then in *Christianity Today*, highlight a large chunk of this academic work. Bell also compiled an extensive record of correspondence that offers additional insight into his racial perspective. Overlapping Bell's editorials and his letters provide depth to the analysis of his racial psyche.

Despite access to a wealth of Bell's editorials and other original documents, this study has certain limitations. His papers reside at The Billy Graham Archive at Wheaton College in Wheaton, IL. Unfortunately, the archive does not own copyright material for Bell's papers and, therefore, cannot permit direct quotes from those documents. The inability to use the actual words from Bell's correspondence and, instead, forced to rely on paraphrasing, limits the power of his voice and makes it more difficult to distinguish his words from mine. Thankfully, Bell's editorials are in the public record and, therefore, quotable. A second limitation is the lack of cross-cultural analysis. From 1916-1941, Bell spent most of his time in China. How Bell's interaction

with the Chinese and later, the Japanese affected his views on the racial dynamics of American society are not explored in this study.

This analysis aims to investigate the contradictions that defined the life of L. Nelson Bell. He was a man of passionate faith who devoted his life to Christian service. He was also an unshakeable defender of social segregation who believed in the inferiority of African Americans. Bell was a byproduct of a religious, social, medical, and political community that valued conservatism and the perpetuation of white supremacy. The relentless consistency of his theological, social, and political beliefs left Bell stuck in a paternalistic past that could not accept a changing society. Bell's views represent a distinct racial worldview that permeated throughout Southern evangelicalism.

CHAPTER 1: “THE COLOR LINE THAT MUST NOT BE CROSSED,” 1944-1953

In June of 1947, L. Nelson Bell penned an editorial for the *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, which he simply entitled “Murder.” In the relatively short piece, Bell detailed his thoughts on a courtroom fiasco that occurred just seventy-five miles from his Montreat home in Greenville, South Carolina. He weighed in on the tragic events that surrounded the death of T.W. Brown and the lynching of Willie Earle.¹

On the night of February 15, 1947, Earle made his way into the backseat of Brown’s taxicab in Greenville, South Carolina. Earle, a 25-year-old black man, suffered from epilepsy and struggled to secure meaningful employment because of his condition. His disappointments led to drinking and anger problems that eventually landed him in jail for a brief stint after he attacked a construction foreman. Brown, a 48-year-old white man, was a wounded World War I veteran who settled into the taxi business after his return from Europe because it was one of the few jobs that his physical limitations would allow him to perform.²

Earle was on his way to see his mother, who lived in Pickens, South Carolina, about twenty miles away from Greenville. Unfortunately, before the night ended, Brown lay in a hospital bed fighting for his life after being robbed and stabbed, and Earle faced an uncertain future as he sat in the Pickens jail. Earle was taken into custody and held by the jailor, Ed Gilstrap. At approximately 5:00 am on February 17, a group of armed

¹ L. Nelson Bell, “Murder,” *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 6, no. 4 (June 16, 1947): 2.

² Rebecca West, “Opera in Greenville,” *The New Yorker*, June 14, 1947, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1947/06/14/opera-in-greenville>.

men demanded that Gilstrap hand Earle over to them. With his family sleeping upstairs, Gilstrap relented and gave Earle to the assailants. Gilstrap indicated that some of the men wore taxicab hats and that some of the vehicles were taxicabs. The mob proceeded to beat and shoot Earle in what became the last recorded lynching in South Carolina. Just four hours after authorities found Earle's body, Brown died in a Greenville hospital.³

Newly elected governor of South Carolina, Strom Thurmond, expressed outrage over the incident. He stated, "I do not favor lynching and I will exert every force at my command to apprehend all persons engaged in such a flagrant violation of the law."⁴ The authorities brought twenty-eight men to trial over Earle's lynching, but on May 17, in a crowded Greenville courtroom, the jury acquitted the accused of any wrongdoing. A celebration ensued as the defendants and their families openly rejoiced in the injustice of an unmerited exoneration.⁵

The lynching trial brought national attention to the Upstate of South Carolina and also made an impression on Bell.⁶ In his June 1947 editorial, he detailed his thoughts on the lynching trial and the broader issues that encompassed the situation. The article provided insight into the approach and structure that often characterized Bell's writings. He began with a condemnation of discrimination, prejudice, and in this case, violence

³ West, "Opera in Greenville," *The New Yorker*, June 14, 1947; "Negro's Body is Found Shot and Stabbed," *The Greenville News*, February 18, 1947.

⁴ "Assisting in Lynch Probe," *The Greenville News*, February 18, 1947.

⁵ Rebecca West, "Opera in Greenville," *The New Yorker*, June 14, 1947.

⁶ The lynching trial drew national coverage evidenced by the *New Yorker's* coverage of the event. West was a well-known journalist highlighted by her coverage of the Nuremburg trials. Newspapers in Pittsburg, St. Louis, Cleveland, Sacramento, and papers from all regions of the country covered the trial of Willie Earle. The author of this study also referenced William B. Gravely, *They Stole Him Out of Jail: Willie Earle, South Carolina's Last Lynching Victim* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2019).

against African Americans, but concluded with a critique of progressive racial objectives.⁷

Bell denounced the all-white jury and accused them of being accessories to the crime. He described the sham trial as “revolting” and called for a drastic change in the minds of many of his fellow Southerners. Bell believed that too many of the region's white citizenry supported the despicable and tragic nature of Earle's lynching.⁸ Bell's editorial offers a glimpse into his racial politics. It distinguishes Bell from the abrasive contingent of white Southerners who reveled in the violent threat imposed by Jim Crow, while simultaneously showcasing his rejection of progressive racial ideas.⁹ Even Southern demagogues like Strom Thurmond deplored mob violence, and proclamations against such actions gave Southern politicians and paternalists like Bell, some semblance of respectability within the national discussion on race.¹⁰

Despite Bell's condemnation of Earle's lynching and the circus atmosphere of the trial, he closed his editorial with a deliberate critique of Northerners and what he saw as their uninformed solutions to the Southern race problem. He believed that Northern Christians and most of his Southern peers agreed that the trial was a blatant “miscarriage of justice.” However, he also thought that Northern interference in Southern affairs directly threatened not only the Southern way of life but specifically the

⁷ Bell, “Murder,” *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, June 16, 1947

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ There are many examples of abrasive and violent supporters of Jim Crow not just within groups like the KKK or the White Citizens Councils but also in high profile political positions. In 1946, the Georgia gubernatorial campaign of Eugene Talmadge and the Mississippi senate campaign of Theodore Bilbo in Mississippi each openly incited violence against African Americans. James Cobb, *The South and America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7,15.

¹⁰ David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 36.

core of racial segregation. Bell's protective stance over the South represented the continued sectional debate over the nation's racial problems.¹¹ From Bell's perspective, this debate was both political and theological and pitted him against the liberal wing of American Protestantism.

Bell routinely argued that the greatest advocates for black racial advancement were Southern white Christians who understood the distinct nuances of race in their region. It was the benevolence, and inherent insights of this group that he believed would solve racial problems below the Mason Dixon Line.¹² In both his editorials and personal correspondence, Bell expressed a consistent disdain for the liberal leanings of Northern Protestants. A combination of Bell's devotion to his vision of Southern heritage and his rejection of Northern political and theological progressives shaped his sectional posture. In the lynching editorial, Bell wrote, "So far the contributions which are most effective towards improved race relations in the South are coming from those who live in the midst of these problems. Some of the 'solutions' which are gratuitously being offered (abolishing of segregation and elimination of social lines) are but adding fuel to a burning fire." Bell notes what he believed were failed solutions by Northerners but does not offer any answers of his own. When discussing racial problems in the South, Bell often wrote in the abstract with little if any tangible proposals designed to solve the issues.

¹¹ In 1941, W.J. Cash wrote about the emergence of a New South characterized by industrialization and modernization but how, despite progress, the region continued to march away from the present to the past. The threat to the "Southern way of life" often turned white Southerners away from progressive ideas and into a protective state over their region. Bell's consistent frustration with the North and its meddling into Southern affairs represented this mindset that Cash described. W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), xlvii-li).

¹² Bell, "Murder," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, June 16, 1947.

Bell believed that the North insisted upon the eradication of the Southern racial order and that the imposition of a progressive racial agenda would accomplish that goal. He thought that desegregation and other attempts to blur the color line would result in permanent harm to the Southern status quo and that any reshaping of the social landscape in the region should only come through the slow and gradual efforts of white Southerners. From Bell's perspective, it was this group that best understood the region's racial problems and, therefore, best equipped to address the South's racial dilemmas.¹³

The editorial Bell penned in the aftermath of the Earle lynching was one of the countless pieces he wrote between 1942 and 1973. He was a relentless writer, often publishing multiple editorials each week and consistently crafting potential topics and outlines as he went about his daily business. Upon his return from China in 1941, Bell not only opened a very successful medical practice but also began preparations to create a theologically conservative journal to combat liberals from both within the Southern Presbyterian Church and those outside the denomination. In 1942 Bell alongside Presbyterian minister and fellow North Carolinian, Henry Dendy, formed *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*. This publication served as a voice for conservative thought until its final edition in 1987.¹⁴ It was through his editorial work in the *Journal* that Bell's platform and influence grew. Although starting from humble beginnings, in just a few short years, the *Journal* amassed over 13,000 full paid subscribers from across the Southern states.¹⁵ Bell's words dominated the editorial pages, but his ideas

¹³ Bell, "Murder," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, June 16, 1947.

¹⁴ In 1959, *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* was renamed *The Presbyterian Journal*.

¹⁵ L. Nelson Bell, "An Objective and a Request," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 5, no. 21 (March 1, 1947): 2.

filtered throughout the entire publication. As an editor, Bell worked with Dendy to decide which outside contributions would find their way into the pages of the *Journal*. Week in and week out, Bell's guiding hand shaped the conservative musings of *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*.

As historian Joel Williamson has noted, during the 1920s and 1930s, Southern whites had little conflict between their conscious and contemporary racial matters.¹⁶ Similarly, during the first several years of the 1940s, Bell's racial conscience rarely filtered into his writings. Between 1942 and 1946, Bell wrote more articles about the dangers of modern dancing than he did on race relations. Overshadowed by World War II and his editorials on Christian piety, the subject of race rarely drew Bell's attention. The first editorial he penned on racial issues was in March of 1944 in response to the annual message on race relations that the Federal Council of Churches in America (FCC) released in December of 1943. This editorial began Bell's long-running critique of the Federal Council of Churches and its byproduct, the National Council of Churches in America (NCC).¹⁷ Throughout his writing career, these two organizations were frequent recipients of Bell's indignation. Only Bell's later disdain for Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement rivaled his contempt for the FCC and the NCC.

Founded in 1908, the origins of the FCC began in the late nineteenth-century with efforts to bring Protestant denominations into a national partnership that enabled cooperation while at the same time maintaining denominational independence. The ecumenical aspirations of the organization filtered over into areas, which the FCC called

¹⁶ Williamson, *A Rage for Order*, 252.

¹⁷ The National Council of Churches in America formed when the Federal Council of Churches merged with other ecumenical organizations in 1950.

a “Social Creed.” According to their founding objectives, the FCC set out in part to “secure a larger combined influence for the churches of Christ in all matters affecting the moral and social condition of the people, so as to promote the application of the law of Christ in every relation of human life.”¹⁸ From the very beginning, the FCC linked its purposes with those of the Social Gospel initiative, which often put the Council at odds with its membership. Competing emphasis developed between conservative and liberal wings of the FCC. Conservatives desired more focus on evangelism and things like Christian education, while liberals sought more engagement with social and economic issues. In the decades before World War II, race played a peripheral role in the broader FCC agenda as issues like organized labor and other class-based problems drew the Council’s attention. As Robert Schneider wrote, “From its early years the council had an ambivalent relationship with its member denominations. Created to represent them, it also came to have a life of its own and perspectives of its own which were not always consistent, or even compatible, with those of the churches.”¹⁹ The cause of the Social Gospel became the driving force for the FCC in its early years, and that put it at odds with conservative factions of its membership.

One of those denominations with internal struggles over the FCC was the Presbyterian Church of the United States (PCUS). The more informal name for the denomination was the Southern Presbyterian Church. Despite not officially separating until secession, the issue of slavery split American Presbyterians into Northern and

¹⁸ Cited in Robert A. Schneider, “The Federal Council of Churches and American Presbyterians, 1900-1950,” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* 84, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 106.

¹⁹ Schneider, “The Federal Council of Churches and American Presbyterians, 1900-1950,” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (Fall/Winter 2006): 114.

Southern contingents during the antebellum era.²⁰ The PCUS was a founding member of the FCC, but the more conservative wing of the denomination often balked at the Social Gospel initiatives of the organization. Conservatives argued that the “spirituality of the church” should be the only essential activity of the Church. At the same time, the more socially conscious members of the PCUS, like Walter Lingle, did not reject the importance of personal conversion, but they also believed in the essential nature of the Social Gospel. This debate consistently circulated throughout PCUS circles during the first half of the twentieth century with conservatives seeking to remove the denomination from the FCC. On two separate occasions, the conservative faction developed enough support to vote the PCUS out of the FCC. The PCUS General Assembly ended its relationship with the FCC in 1911 but voted to return the following year. In 1931, the PCUS General Assembly disassociated with the FCC again based on two concerns. The first issue was the denomination’s fear that the Council favored communist themes and secondly, that the Council supported the use of birth control by married couples. The PCUS remained separate from the FCC until 1941 when members of the General Assembly concluded that denominational cooperation during wartime warranted membership again.²¹

L. Nelson Bell was a lifelong member of the Southern Presbyterian Church and a strong supporter of issues important to the conservative wing of the denomination,

²⁰ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 659-661; The separation of Presbyterians remained until reunification efforts between the Northern Presbyterian Church and the Southern Presbyterian Church finally succeeded in 1983.

²¹ Schneider, “The Federal Council of Churches and American Presbyterians, 1900-1950,” 119. The FCC’s impetus on social action was the cause of the PCUS break from the FCC in 1911. Despite returning the following year, between 1912 and 1931, the General Assembly of the PCUS instructed its delegates to protest any action that the FCC took that did not specifically guard the “spirituality of the church.”

including the significance of the “spirituality of the church” and stance on the necessity of segregation. In 1943, the FCC created what they called “a message on race.” Bell’s criticism of that message was the first of his many critiques of the ecumenical organization. The FCC statement was the most direct official statement on race discrimination issued by the FCC in its thirty-five-year history. The message declared that “the growing resentment by dark skinned peoples against white domination and their feeling that they are deprived of the position properly belonging to free men in a democratic society make it mandatory for Christians to speak with prophetic voice and with apostolic conviction.”²² Amidst the throes of World War II, the FCC promoted a united America. The organization claimed that Americans agreed upon winning the war as quickly as possible and making sure that victory led to a cooperative world where all men were free. The FCC’s message on race continued: “We should say to ourselves: My welfare is bound up with that of every citizen, and every citizen’s suffering is mine. Everyone is implicated in whatever social condition exists, and every social gain is a triumph for every individual.”²³

The FCC called on Christians to conquer racial prejudices and argued that “there must be a change on our part not only of policy but of manner; not only of behavior but of heart. For in this conflict in which every race is involved and in which freedom is a shining goal, we as a nation shall prove our sincerity by achieving within our own boundaries vital community, irrespective of color, or cultural heritage.” The message implored Christians to “examine (their) conduct, in the sight of God toward those of

²² “Christians Urged to Fight Race Bias,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 1943.

²³ *Ibid.*

other races, and through the instrument of his own personality seek correction of inequalities that exist in his community.”²⁴ The statements by the FCC attacked the practice of racial segregation. Despite not directly addressing the issue, Bell read between the lines and took to his typewriter to confront the FCC and defend what he believed was the moral nature of segregation.

Bell’s March 1944 editorial, entitled “Race Relations – Whither?,” expressed several of his foundational racial assumptions on issues like segregation and intermarriage. He began by stating, “We in the South have a race problem and we should face it squarely.” Bell agreed with the FCC on that point and readily admitted the racial problems that faced the region. He continued by writing, “discrimination and injustices practiced against the negroes are real and they need our attention. Equal opportunities for education and gainful employment should be theirs.” Bell frequently used the phrase “discrimination and injustices” in both his editorials and his correspondence to describe the plight of African Americans in the South. He understood his home region and the history of cruelty that many of his fellow white citizens imposed upon their black neighbors. Compared to many of the more violent members of the South’s white population, Bell often expressed a level of sympathy for African Americans. Although Bell never used the phrase “separate but equal,” in any of his writings, his views ostensibly aligned with that notion.²⁵ Despite Bell’s apparent concerns about equal opportunities for black Southerners, he did not use his editorial

²⁴ “Christians Urged to Fight Race Bias,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 1943.

²⁵ I was unable to find any reference to the “separate but equal” phrase in Bell’s correspondence or in his published writings. He never directly mentions the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, but his rhetoric does make a “separate but equal” argument.

pen to write about how best to achieve those opportunities. He never wrote in detail about improvements in the educational system, the need to enhance job training, or greater voting access. Instead, throughout the 1940s and 1950s, he promoted what he saw as the desperate need to ensure a segregated color line. From Bell's perspective, this vitally essential line "must be drawn and not crossed."²⁶

Bell did not arbitrarily draw this "color line" himself but instead argued that it was a line drawn explicitly by God to prevent the intermingling of races. Bell went directly to Scripture to tease out his argument for segregation and relied on many of the same talking points that antebellum Southerners used to defend slavery.²⁷ First, he directed his readers to Acts 17, which details Paul's sermon on Mars Hill.²⁸ Bell quoted the King James Bible which states that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation."²⁹ Bell did not proceed into a detailed explanation of the verse but simply used the phrase "bounds of their habitation" as proof that God bound people into racial categories. The verse in the King James Version makes no mention of race, and more modern translations of the Bible interpret the phrase as "boundaries of their lands," which describes a geographical boundary rather than a racial one. The racial connotation that Bell imposed upon the "bounds of habitation" served, in his mind,

²⁶ L. Nelson Bell, "Race Relations- Whither?" *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 2, no. 11 (March 1944): 5.

²⁷ For further study on the Biblical defense of slavery during the antebellum years read Mark Noll's book, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

²⁸ Modern translations replace Mars Hill with Aeropagus.

²⁹ Acts 17:26 (King James Version).

as an irrefutable truth ordained by God. This interpretation reflected a worldview that promoted a racial hierarchy.³⁰

Bell proceeded to make a second argument for segregation based on Biblical interpretation. He wrote, “(The color line) which is fixed is racial. Why God saw fit to make some men white and some black may go back to Genesis 9. Racial difference is a fact which no human philosophy can change.” Genesis chapter nine tells the story of Noah in the years after the flood. He built a vineyard, and after drinking the fruits of his labor ended up drunk and “uncovered within his tent.” Noah’s youngest son, Ham, found him, and instead of covering his father, went to tell his older brothers. Ham’s brothers went to Noah and “covered the nakedness of their father.” After Noah awoke, he cursed the descendants of Ham. Noah declared that God would bless the descendants of his oldest sons while the descendants of Ham would be their servants.³¹ Those who argued for slavery and later for segregation assumed that blacks were the descendants of Ham, and the curse laid upon them justified racial distinctions.³²

The March 1944 editorial not only described Bell’s beliefs about the God-ordained nature of segregation but also detailed Bell’s views on interracial marriage. He wrote, “This (color line) is also biological. Cross the line and half-breeds result. Those of us who have lived for years in the Orient have seen the unhappiness, even agony, which has come from breaking over the barrier God has established.” Herein lies the crux of Bell’s segregationist views. Above all else, he wanted to prevent interracial

³⁰ Bell, “*Race Relations-Whither?*” (March 1944): 5.

³¹ Genesis 9:20-27 (King James Version).

³² Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crises* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 33-36.

marriage. It is this contention that shaped his racial perspective and caused him to remain a stalwart for segregation. The thought of black boys and girls intermingling with white boys and girls proved to be Bell's greatest social fear. In an editorial he wrote in October of 1944, Bell stated, "Take the question of race relations. The solution is found when those boys and girls, regardless of color, find the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior."³³ As Bell demonstrated throughout his writing career, he believed that overcoming racial problems and unrest occurred through the transformation of individual hearts in the form of personal conversion. Bell consistently stood firm against what he saw as the threats of structural changes like social integration.

In the "Race Relations-Whither?" editorial of March 1944, Bell also relayed a story he heard about a young woman who visited her injured husband in a military hospital. As she left the hospital, Bell wrote that she was asked out on a date by a black soldier. He goes on to suggest that "such incidents will increase and now is the time for those who are genuinely concerned to see that all attempts to cross this (color) line be stopped. If not, only sorrow and even worse discrimination lie ahead." Bell consistently invoked his belief in the existential danger caused by interracial relationships. He feared that not only would intermarriage lead to "half-breeds," but that discrimination of minority groups would increase as a result of such relationship decisions. From Bell's perspective, preventing interracial relationships would save African Americans from the torments of a discriminating society. Ever the advocate for quelling dissent in racial matters, Bell believed that he was protecting African Americans

³³ L. Nelson Bell, "Blowing Out Sparks at a Three-Alarm Fire," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 3, no. 6 (October 1944): 2.

from themselves while at the same time promoting racial integrity. Bell's views on intermarriage stretched beyond just whites and blacks and included relationships between whites and all other races.³⁴ Bell never discussed interracial marriages across nonwhite groups. It is unclear whether Bell believed that interracial relationships in the nonwhite world were acceptable.

In the editorial from March of 1944, Bell distinguished between the social and spiritual nature of the "color line." He wrote, "Thank God, this line does not in any way affect the solution of the soul's need of the individual. God died for all and his salvation is free to all. The souls of every man, woman and child, be he black white, yellow or brown, are equally precious in God's sight." From a spiritual perspective, Bell called black Christians his "brothers in Christ." He believed in spiritual equality between the races and that everyone, regardless of color, had the same access to eternal salvation. However, the spiritual equality that Bell purported did not translate to social equality.³⁵

A recurring question that Bell posed throughout his editorials centered around the concept of whether segregation was "unchristian." In the March 1944 editorial, he stated, "We wish to affirm that we do not believe that segregation is un-Christian. In fact, it is a kindness to both those races. If that one point is accepted by white and negro leaders who are looking for a solution, a long step forward have been taken."³⁶ Herein lies another of Bell's fundamental arguments for improving race relations. He suggested that racial injustices would improve when people of different races offered

³⁴ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Harietta Heaton, March 4, 1967. Box 27, Folder 26, CN 318: Records of L. Nelson Bell. Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

³⁵ Bell, "Race Relations- Whither?" (March 1944): 5.

³⁶ Ibid.

genuine kindness to each other. Bell believed that simple courtesies among blacks and whites would eventually transform race relations. However, in Bell's writings, this transformation did not include the end to social segregation. Instead, it rejected the notion of a deep-seated structural system that prevented African Americans from equal opportunities and ensured the perpetuation of the white power structure in American society. From Bell's perspective, if only there were an abundance of kindness and pleasantries between races, events like the lynching of Willie Earle would never happen.

Bell concluded his March 1944 editorial with a renewed attack on the FCC. He accused the organization of being "gratuitous in the extreme." Bell quoted the final words of the FCC's annual message, which stated that "full fellowship in Christ at the foot of the Cross" is denied our colored brethren by those who insist on the maintenance of the God-ordained racial line in social relations." Bell took offense to the FCC's message of desegregation and their argument that segregation in churches denied African Americans a complete spiritual experience. He went on the attack and insinuated that problems of racial discrimination were not prevalent within the Church but instead blamed non-Christian instigators for racial discrimination. He pointed to the leaders of recent race riots as being "godless men of the lower social strata who have no Christian background."³⁷ Bell concluded that racial discrimination and unrest were caused not by conservative Southern white Christians who favored segregation but

³⁷ Although Bell does not mention specific race riots, based on the timing of his editorial it is highly possible that he was referring to the riots in Detroit in June of 1943 and in Harlem in August of 1943.

instead by proponents of desegregation. Bell viewed both the efforts of the FCC and those non-Christian instigators as equally to blame for the nation's racial problems.³⁸

Bell's editorials avoided racial issues in the two years following his critique of the FCC's annual message on race, but that changed in 1947 as Bell's position forced him to address race on a more local level. On March 15, 1947, William Hooper, a twenty-five-year-old black resident of Black Mountain, North Carolina, entered the Phillips home in Black Mountain at about 12:30 am. As Mrs. Phillips testified, she was alone that night and awoke to find someone standing by the bed and bending over her. She screamed after switching on the bed lamp and saw a black man running out of the room wearing a cap. The local sheriff got the intruder's description from Mrs. Phillips's and went directly to Hooper's home and found a hat and coat which matched Mrs. Phillips's account. Hooper was arrested forty-five minutes after the incident, and in a signed statement, he admitted to being drunk and not knowing what he was doing. He also attested that he had no intention of harming anyone.³⁹

The charge against Hooper was first-degree burglary with the intent to rape despite the agreed-upon fact that he never touched Mrs. Phillips. On April 15, Hooper was convicted and sentenced. In his closing comments, Judge Zeb Nettles said, "Every man's home is his castle and when a woman, a child or a man lies down to sleep in that castle he must be allowed to sleep in safety without fear of intruders who would do harm." Nettles sentenced Hooper to death to be carried out on July 9 in the gas

³⁸ Bell, "Race Relations- Whither?" (March 1944): 5.

³⁹ "Youth Convicted of First Degree Burglary: William Hooper Awaits Judgment in Superior Court Here," *The Asheville Citizen*, April 16, 1947.

chamber at the North Carolina State prison.⁴⁰ L. Nelson Bell's Montreat home was just a few miles from where the incident took place. Despite no indication of a personal relationship with Hooper or any of his relatives, Bell used his influence to correct what he saw as a grave miscarriage of justice.

On April 22, Bell wrote a letter to the governor of North Carolina, Gregg Cherry, asking him to make a special inquiry into Hooper's case. Bell conceded that severe punishment was deserving for Hooper but that the death sentence made a mockery of both the law and justice. Bell informed the governor that on the same day of Hooper's death sentence in the Asheville court circuit, Judge Nettles also sentenced a private in the military, Robert Warden, to thirty years of hard labor. Warden took a gun to a local club and ended up shooting two women, one of whom died.⁴¹ Bell asked Cherry to do whatever possible to make Hooper's punishment fit the crime. Cherry responded to Bell on April 28, indicating that he would ask the Commissioner of Paroles to review Hooper's file.⁴² Bell's efforts on behalf of Hooper paid off. The North Carolina Supreme Court granted Hooper a new trial. Upon conclusion of a new trial, Judge Nettles sentenced Hooper to thirty years at hard labor.⁴³ After eleven years in prison, the state parole board released Hooper.⁴⁴

Bell's intervention into Hooper's case provides an anecdotal insight into the criminal justice system of the late 1940s in North Carolina. However, for this study, it

⁴⁰ "Sentence Of Death Is Imposed," *The Asheville Citizen*, April 19, 1947.

⁴¹ "Warden Given 25 To 35 Years In Murder Case," *The Asheville Citizen*, April 19, 1947.

⁴² Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Governor Gregg Cherry, April 22, 1947, Box 28, Folder 19, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton (IL); Letter from Governor Gregg Cherry to L. Nelson Bell, April 28, 1947, Box 28, Folder 19, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton (IL).

⁴³ "Negro Is given Thirty Years On Burglary Count," *The Asheville Citizen*, October 18, 1947.

⁴⁴ "Negro Draws Life Term For Burglary," *The Asheville Citizen*, August 21, 1958.

confirms in part Bell's relationship with the African American community. He was outraged over the sentence which Judge Nettles handed down. He saw an injustice against a black man and sought to do his part to correct that injustice. As Bell noted with frequency, he realized the discriminations and prejudices that affected African Americans in the South, and his actions in the Hooper case showed that he believed he had a role to play in righting those wrongs. Bell's efforts on Hooper's behalf provide an example of the racial perspective that defined Bell's life. He supported attempts to end discrimination on an individual level as long as it did not challenge the systematic nature of segregation. For Bell, personal choices to lessen discrimination were appropriate and necessary to improve race relations, but structural change that sought to break the nation's racial status quo went too far.

Arguably the most impactful event of 1947 within the framework of America's growing racial landscape did not occur in a court of law or on the streets in organized protest but instead took place on a baseball diamond. Walter O'Malley, the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, signed one of the stars of the Negro Leagues, Jackie Robinson, to a Major League Baseball contract. On April 15, 1947, the same day that the Asheville jury convicted William Hooper, Jackie Robinson made his debut for the Brooklyn Dodgers.⁴⁵

Baseball ran through the veins of L. Nelson Bell. He was an outstanding high school and college pitcher and turned down an opportunity to play professional baseball to pursue his medical missionary career instead. Once returning to Asheville, Bell found

⁴⁵ For insights into Jackie Robinson, the author of this study referenced the following book: Jackie Robinson, *I Never Had it Made* (New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 1995); Roger Kahn, *The Boys of Summer* (New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 2006).

a renewed interest in the game. The local minor league baseball team, the Asheville Tourists, played in one of the oldest parks in the country. Greats like Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, and Lou Gehrig each played in the Tourists home ballpark, McCormick Field. As Major League Teams like the New York Yankees and Brooklyn Dodgers made their way north after the completion of spring training in Florida, the big league clubs would stay sharp by playing minor league teams along the train routes. Asheville was a frequent stop for many Major League teams during this time. Bell was a longstanding Asheville Tourist season ticket holder and attended games whenever his schedule allowed. He even threw out the ceremonial first pitch three different times.⁴⁶

Jackie Robinson and the Dodgers played in McCormick Field on their way to Brooklyn in April of 1948, and it is plausible but not confirmed that Bell saw Robinson play that day. If so, Bell would have enjoyed the game from the segregated white bleachers as the black population of Asheville cheered their hero from the third baseline, where the Tourist designated bleachers for African Americans. Just two months after Robinson broke the Major League Baseball color barrier, Bell penned a glowing editorial about Robinson. Bell wrote, "we have been pulling for Jackie Robinson ever since he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers as their first basemen. He has overcome difficulties we do not fully appreciate. His teammates too have shown a tolerance and sportsmanship which is most commendable... That a negro has by sheer ability won a place for himself at the top in this game is a welcome sign." Bell entitled

⁴⁶ Pollock, *A Foreign Devil in China*, 297; Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Alan Harazin, February 10, 1973. Box 37, Folder 1, CN: 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell. Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

the editorial on Jackie Robinson, "Progress," and expressed genuine and heartfelt admiration for the Dodger's second basemen.⁴⁷

Despite Bell's praise for Robinson, he closed the editorial in the same way he concluded his commentary on the Earle lynching. Bell did not finish his article with praise for Robinson but instead left his readers with an injection of paternalistic rhetoric. He wrote, "We do not believe that many negroes desire the breaking down of racial barriers. What they desire, and deserve, is the elimination of discriminations which bar their rightful progress. In this movement Christians should lead."⁴⁸ The curious aspect of Bell's closing plea is the way he speaks on behalf of black people. Bell assumed that many African Americans agreed with his belief in segregation and that their only desire was the end of discrimination, not the end of segregation.⁴⁹ Bell walked a fine line with this argument, implying that Robinson did not break down a racial barrier but instead was simply able to eliminate discrimination. Unfortunately, Bell did not elaborate on what he believed were the differences between breaking down a racial barrier and eliminating discrimination but Robinson's appearance on a Major League Baseball diamond provides insight into Bell's racial viewpoint. Baseball was a safe place for racial advancement. In 1947, baseball was the all-American game played in segregated stadiums, where young black boys and young white girls did not cross

⁴⁷ L. Nelson Bell, "Progress," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 6, no. 6 (July 15, 1947): 5.

⁴⁸ Bell, "Progress," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, (July 15, 1947): 5.

⁴⁹ Some African Americans agreed with aspects of Bell's segregationist views. Concerns over the loss of black cultural institutions fueled much of this including the loss of African American schools. For example, author/activists Zora Neale Hurston had concerns over the end of segregation. Thurston wrote an editorial in which she called the *Brown v. Board* decision "insulting rather than honoring my race." She questioned why black Americans would want to be in a school where they were not wanted. Zora Neale Hurston, "Court Order Can't Make Races Mix," *The Orlando Sentinel*, (August 11, 1955).

paths. It was a protected place where a humble, soft-spoken black man like Robinson could achieve the American dream.

Bans against interracial marriage became personal for Bell during the 1940s in his home community of Montreat. In many respects, since its founding, Montreat served as the centerpiece of the Southern Presbyterian Church. In the mid-1890s, a Congregationalist minister from New Haven, Connecticut, John C. Collins, desired to create a resort for rest and health purposes that also provided educational and religious programs in Western North Carolina.⁵⁰ Collins realized that the natural beauty of the region's mountainous terrain would make Montreat an ideal location for a Christian gathering place. Western North Carolina had an established history of tourism and leisure and began drawing travelers to area resorts during the antebellum period. After the Civil War, the health tourism industry boomed due to the perceived health benefits of the region's mild climate. The area became a hotbed for sanitoriums, resorts, and Christian conference centers.⁵¹

In March of 1897, Collins and a group of interdenominational church leaders received a charter of incorporation from the state government. The new Mountain Retreat Association (MRA) held its first Bible Conference just four months later.⁵² Due to Montreat's location, it quickly developed both a southern and Presbyterian feel. In 1905, Dr. J.R. Howerton, the pastor of Charlotte's First Presbyterian Church, began making preparations to secure the Montreat property for the direct purpose of

⁵⁰ William Bean Kennedy, "An Educational Center of the Presbyterian Church," *Presbyterian Historical Society* 74, No. 2 (Summer 1996): 93.

⁵¹ Richard D. Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 9-34.

⁵² Kennedy, "An Educational Center of the Presbyterian Church," 93.

transitioning the MRA for exclusive use by the Southern Presbyterian Church.⁵³ From the early years of PCUS control, Montreat's role in the denomination grew exponentially. Presbyterian historian, Ernest Trice Thompson wrote, "Already Montreat was tending to become the heart and center of the church's life a rallying point where leaders of the church were able to gather and meet for at least a portion of the summer."⁵⁴ Montreat became the epicenter of PCUS life and quickly became a beloved and cherished community.⁵⁵

The MRA hosted a plethora of summer conferences, which drew individuals and families from all over the South. Adults enjoyed conference topics such as Christian education, leadership, home missions, and foreign missions.⁵⁶ The extremely popular Bible Conference and then the Minister's Conference closed out each summer's activities. One of the most heavily attended conferences was the Montreat Women's Conference. The first recorded activity for women at Montreat was a missionary conference hosted in 1907. As a result of continued interest in mission work, the first official Montreat Women's Conference began in 1911 and became a staple in the MRA's yearly schedule.⁵⁷ Children in Montreat enjoyed a host of activities. There were summer camps for both boys and girls and other activities that brought children and youth of the PCUS together.

⁵³ Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky*, 96-97.

⁵⁴ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, Vol 3, 152.

⁵⁵ Two former Presidents of the MRA, R.C. Anderson and Grier Davis, wrote the "official" Montreat histories. Anderson was the President of the MRA from 1911 to 1947. His book *The Story of Montreat From Its Beginning: 1897-1947* was published by Kingsport Press in Kingsport, TN in 1949. Grier Davis' book, *Montreat: A Retreat for Renewal, 1947-1972* was published by Arcata Graphics in Kingsport, TN in 1986.

⁵⁶ "Montreat Conferences for 1946," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 4, no. 15 (February 1, 1946): 18.

⁵⁷ Rebecca Young, "A Place in the Heart: Montreat Conference Center and the women of the PCUS," *American Presbyterians* 74. No. 2 (Summer 1996): 119.

Montreat became a religious and leisure gathering place where generations of white Southern Presbyterians congregated year after year to celebrate family and faith. However, Montreat and the PCUS, in general, consisted of members from middle and upper-class American society. William Kennedy quotes a 1949 report that reflected the privileged socioeconomic makeup of a majority of PCUS members. The research study, performed by PCUS member Sherrill Lewis, suggested that “we are also a church of the comfortably-off living in the midst of poverty.”⁵⁸ Montreat swiftly became an economically privileged community where a transgenerational network of elite families formed.⁵⁹ It became a gathering place for white middle and upper-class PCUS families. Cultural anthropologist, Gwen Kennedy Neville, studied the role of kinship of Montreat’s unique community. She noted that a group of religiously “devout industrialists” migrated to Montreat each summer. These captains of industry and business leaders, located mainly in the Carolina Piedmont, perpetuated their inner circle of families and “was aided considerably by the creation of a pleasant summer environment for their young to meet and fall in love.”⁶⁰

Montreat was not only a place for rest, refreshment, and education, but it was also a central place where the politics and the programs of the church often took shape.⁶¹ Debates between conservatives and liberals dominated discussions of the

⁵⁸ Kennedy, *Montreat: An Educational Center of the Presbyterian Church*, 102.

⁵⁹ Gwen Kennedy Neville, *Kinship and Pilgrimage: Rituals of Reunion in American Protestant Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 118.

⁶⁰ Neville, *Kinship and Pilgrimage*, 117. According to William Kennedy’s article “Montreat: An Educational Center of the Presbyterian Church,” as of 1996 there had yet to be an African American who owned property in Montreat. Anecdotal conversations with residents in 2020 suggest that Montreat has yet to have its first African American homeowner.

⁶¹ Joel L. Alvis, “The Montreat Conference Center and Presbyterian Social Policy,” *American Presbyterians* 74. No. 2 (Summer 1996): 133.

1920s and 1930s, but the following decade brought racial concerns to the forefront as well. In the later part of the 1940s, L. Nelson Bell served on a committee to address some of the growing racial concerns regarding African American attendance at conferences. Before the 1950s, African Americans were a staple in Montreat but not as equals with their white counterparts. They worked in service-oriented jobs such as bellhops, waitresses, and servants of the white families coming for the summer months. Racial segregation typified Montreat throughout the first half of the twentieth century. It was practiced not only in the communities in which PCUS members lived but in their place of summer retreat as well.⁶² Joel Alvis, Presbyterian minister, and former staff member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Department of History described the subtle yet contentious nature of Montreat's racial dilemma. He wrote, "Segregated church services and Sunday School classes for 'Colored People' were a long time feature of the Montreat Conference Center... The presence of these services and the people they served was part of the fabric of life in the mountain retreat and a source of tension."⁶³ Segregation and Montreat went hand in hand.

After Bell's return from China in 1941, Montreat became Bell's home. He spent the remaining thirty-two years of his life deeply connected with both the Montreat community and the PCUS. Not only was Bell a member of the Board of Directors for the MRA and frequent representative to the PCUS General Assembly, but he also served the Montreat Presbyterian Church as an elder and taught a widely popular Sunday School class each week. Bell was also heavily involved as a contributor to

⁶² Alvis, "The Montreat Conference Center and Presbyterian Social Policy," 134.

⁶³ Ibid.

Montreat College, where he served on the Board and spent countless hours in fundraising efforts to support the school.⁶⁴

Bell's official involvement with racial concerns at Montreat began in 1949 when he was appointed by the MRA's Executive Committee to serve on a three-person committee tasked with developing a policy for African American attendance to Montreat conferences. Rumblings of racial discontent in Montreat began in the mid-1930s when the young people of the PCUS launched bold action to combat racial injustice and fight for human rights within the confines of their denomination. This action manifested in a struggle over the rights of African American young people and their attendance at Montreat conferences.⁶⁵ In 1936, the MRA instructed the Young People's Council of the Assembly (YPCA) that at their upcoming leadership conference, any African American attendees must stay in segregated rooms. These accommodations for black attendees were significantly inferior to those of their white peers. The black teenagers also received their meals in a separate area. The MRA also instructed the YPCA to ensure that there be no "social intermingling of the races at social receptions or otherwise." In a letter, the YPCA responded, insisting that the MRA's decision injured the work of the YPCA. Instead of preventing the two scheduled African Americans teenage attendees from participating in social activities, the YPCA decided that they would cancel all planned social activities. After more than a decade of wrangling, a breakthrough occurred. In 1949, based on guidance from the PCUS General Assembly, all youth

⁶⁴ Letter from Howard J. Pew to L. Nelson Bell, November 14, 1955, Box 41, Folder 17, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton College (IL); Letter from L. Nelson Bell to C.C. Dickinson, Box 23, Folder 27, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton College (IL); Letter from Howard J. Pew to L. Nelson Bell, May 28, 1970, Box 41, Folder 19, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton College (IL).

⁶⁵ Mary-Ruth Marshall, "Handling Dynamite: Young People, Race, and Montreat," *American Presbyterians* 74. No. 2 (Summer 1996): 141.

conference attendees stayed in comparable rooms and ate their meals at separate but adjacent tables.⁶⁶

It was this environment in which Bell's three-man committee began its work. Bell published several editorials in *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* detailing the committee's work and final recommendation, which took effect in 1950. The official policy was a direct assault on the prospects of interracial mingling among youth. Bell referred to the plan as one that addressed the "entertainment of Negroes at Montreat." The first section of the policy stated, "that for all adult groups now coming to Montreat for the conferences of the Presbyterian Church U.S., including the meetings of the General Assembly, provision shall be made for entertainment on a non-segregated basis." The MRA maintained the guidance of the General Assembly by allowing adult conferences to proceed on a non-segregated basis. However, the committee confirmed a previous policy that African Americans were only allowed to attend conferences based on a proportionate basis. The MRA made sure that only a small percentage of African Americans attended each conference.⁶⁷

The final message of the MRA policy stated: "That owing to the multiplicity of problems involved, the Board of Directors feels that in the future it cannot entertain Negro delegates to the Young People's Conferences." Bell's team determined that African American teenagers were no longer allowed to attend youth conferences. The threat of intermarriage within the ranks of the Southern Presbyterian Church proved too great for Bell. The policy that resulted from Bell's committee explicitly prevented the

⁶⁶ Marshall, "Handling Dynamite": 151.

⁶⁷ L. Nelson Bell, "Race Relations and Montreat," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 9, no. 4 (June 15, 1950): 2.

intermingling between black and white teenagers. He wrote, "Intermingling on a social basis has been a serious problem at the Young People's Conferences. Many young people have been led to feel that, one is not Christian, unless he or she enters into these social contacts. The Board has looked deeply and frankly into the implications of this situation and has acted realistically and courageously."⁶⁸

In a follow-up editorial in July of 1950, Bell provided more detail regarding the nuances of the policy. He wrote, "For years the Negroes have been coming to Montreat and the adults have not given trouble although some of the white commissioners to the General Assembly seem to have resented their presence. I do not think the women have been a problem at their conference." It is unclear what type of problem Bell believed that black men might cause, but he is clear regarding African American youth. He wrote, "the young people have become an increasing problem. The Board talked this matter over at length and frankly. We unanimously agreed that this intermingling of young people of the two races must stop, so far as Montreat and our responsibility goes." Bell believed that it was part of his social responsibility to prevent black and white teenagers from associating with each other. He goes on to insist that in the future, the Young People's Conference will be for whites only. He wrote, "You say the young people will resent this and fight against it. They may but it will get them nowhere. Our Board means business about this. The management does too."⁶⁹

Bell's non-negotiable stance on interracial relationships continued. He did everything in his power to ensure that the social paths of black and white teenagers

⁶⁸ Bell, "Race Relations and Montreat," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 9, no. 4 (June 15, 1950): 2.

⁶⁹ L. Nelson Bell, "Race Relations and Montreat," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 9, no. 6 (July 15, 1950): 5.

never crossed. He closed out his editorial answering a question he received about any “new factor,” which led the MRA to make this stand over interracial conferences. He wrote, “As to some ‘new factor’ which might have caused this action. This ‘new factor’ has been the ever-present danger of a tragedy with our young people.” Bell argued that the decisive action of the MRA regarding African American teenagers more than balanced out the nominal benefits given to African American adults.⁷⁰

Bell’s follow-up editorial also clarified the MRA’s position on African American adults and what they would and would not be allowed to do. In previous years black men and women ate their meals at the Assembly Inn, which also provided the best accommodations on the Montreat property. Although allowed to eat at Assembly Inn, the rooms assigned to black guests were, according to Bell, “miserable makeshifts, to say the least.” The new policy on entertaining Negroes at Montreat prevented blacks from eating at Assembly Inn but did improve housing conditions, albeit on a segregated basis. Blacks were required to eat in a second cafeteria, and unlike the guests at Assembly Inn, they had to wait on themselves.⁷¹

Bell also made clear to those PCUS members who disapproved of any black Presbyterians attending Montreat that the MRA would maintain the proportion policy that was already in effect. He clarified that only six to eight black attendees were allowed with the exact number based on the ratio of the overall conference size. Bell also cleared up the type of association the black adults could have with their fellow white conference attendees. He wrote, “But, while entertainment is offered Negroes ‘on

⁷⁰ Bell, “Race Relations and Montreat,” *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 9, no. 6 (July 15, 1950): 5.

⁷¹ Ibid.

a non-segregated basis,' the place and manner of entertainment is clearly defined and stipulated." Even black adults interacting with white adults had its limitations.⁷²

Bell believed that a separate independent black Presbyterian Church was necessary to minister to the black population in the South. He wrote, "In my judgment it is a great mistake and the kindest thing we can do, and should do, is to vote (the black synod) as an independent Presbyterian Church. I do not believe there will ever be developed a strong Negro Presbyterian group in the South until that is done." Bell simply saw no benefit in white and black Presbyterians associating with one another in Montreat. He believed that a segregated church was best for all involved.⁷³

After the controversial summer season of 1950 came to an end in Montreat, Bell wrote once more about race before the year ended. The September editorial entitled, "Incidents Worth Emulating," promoted Bell's belief that white Christians should demand the end of discrimination but that this demand did not equate to the elimination of segregation. He wrote, "In the South, where the latter is a numerical as well as a social question, our present generation will probably not see any radical change. But, discrimination should be and is being eliminated." Bell continued by providing examples of how the South was overcoming racial discrimination.⁷⁴

Bell closed his editorial with a return to the baseball diamond. He recounts a recent minor league game he attended at McCormick Field in Asheville. The Tourists were celebrating an "Appreciation Night," where they thanked fans, groundskeepers,

⁷² Bell, "Race Relations and Montreat," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 9, no. 6 (July 15, 1950): 5.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ L. Nelson Bell, "Incidents Worth Emulating," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 9, no. 12 (September 20, 1950): 7.

and others. Part of the night's promotions was a free baseball giveaway at the end of each inning. The winners were chosen based on the numbers on their ticket stub. Bell points to the fact that one baseball of the nine given away went to the "Negro section." He wrote, "These may seem like minor matters but we believe they do much to contribute to good feeling and a bettering of race relations. If Christians will center their efforts on the elimination of the discriminations and humiliations which have only too often characterized our dealings great strides will be made in the right direction."⁷⁵

Bell's baseball giveaway example, though just a "minor matter," unwittingly encapsulated his belief in a racial hierarchy. He was proud of the kindness of the Tourist organization, which gave a free baseball to a single black ticket holder. Eight white baseball fans left the stadium with a free baseball. Bell believed in the end of discrimination and that niceties and pleasant courtesies, as shown by the Asheville Tourist baseball giveaway, were the type of gestures that could slowly chip away at racial disharmony. For Bell, kindness amongst the races and overall racial progress was a good thing if those efforts did not affect the line, which "must be drawn and not crossed."

Between 1951 and 1953, Bell's attention drifted away from racial issues. The Korean War, the threat of communism, and the rejection of pacifism dominated Bell's political mind. It was not until 1954 that Bell once again engaged race on a more critical level. The work of Thurgood Marshall and his team from the Legal Defense Fund of the

⁷⁵ Bell, "Incidents Worth Imitating," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, 7.

NAACP forced Bell to come to grips with a new American society, one which now wrestled with the landmark civil rights case, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

CHAPTER 2: BELL VS. *BROWN* AND THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL SEGREGATION, 1954-1962

On May 17, 1954, L. Nelson Bell was in England, attending Billy Graham's first international crusade. Bell wrote about the highly successful crusade in glowing terms. He admittedly expressed his bias towards his now world-renowned son-in-law when he wrote: "There can be no question but that God has raised up for this generation a man of truly prophetic vision, for Billy Graham has a sense of divine call and destiny as impelling, in some measure, as the prophets of old."¹

For three months, Graham preached in front of jam-packed arenas drawing enormous crowds. The demand to hear Graham's message on the final night of the crusade proved so massive that 100,000 people gathered in London's Wembley Stadium, and another 65,000 crowded into White City Stadium. Graham held a two-hour crusade event at White City and then took about a five-mile bus ride over to Wembley to conclude the highly successful London Crusade. Before Graham left for an extended crusade throughout Europe, he spent almost an hour alone with England's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. The two men spoke privately about matters of faith, and Graham prayed for the world leader before he left. Graham called the London Crusade a watershed moment in his career that helped launch his ministry into greater heights internationally.²

In May of 1954, as Bell fawned over Graham's enormously popular London Crusade, the United States Supreme Court offered up a watershed moment of their

¹ L. Nelson Bell, "I Saw Harringay, *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 13, no. 4, (May 26, 1954), 8.

² Graham, *Just As I Am*, 270-279.

own. In a unanimous decision, the Court forever altered the racial dynamic of the nation's society, overturning the constitutional basis for separate but equal school facilities segregated by race. Bell returned to American soil in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Over the next several years, he adapted his argument for segregation to fit within the legal ramifications set forth by *Brown*. Bell crafted his views on segregation through two defining principles. First, Bell justified his support of segregation based on what he believed was the inalienable right of individual freedom. Secondly, Bell argued that the cultural differences he thought existed between the races validated segregation.

In the years following the *Brown* decision, Bell continued to adhere to his belief in the fundamental threat that interracial marriage caused to American society, but he did not address the subject as combatively or as frequently. Instead, he shifted gears to tackle what he believed was the danger caused by *Brown*. From Bell's perspective, the existential crisis posed by *Brown* went much deeper than just the desegregation of the nation's public schools. He believed that the Supreme Court ruling represented an assault on the individual freedom granted to white Americans. Bell argued that white Americans had the right to maintain whites-only spaces, like their schools and desired social circles, and he did not believe that African Americans had the individual right to access those whites-only spaces. Although Bell did not specifically mention the *Brown* ruling by name in his editorials or correspondences, trying to make sense of its aftermath consistently occupied Bell's thoughts in the years following the Supreme Court decision.

Historian J. Harvie Wilkinson III described the *Brown* ruling as possibly “the most important political, social, and legal event in America’s twentieth-century history. It’s greatness lay in the enormity of injustice it condemned, in the entrenched sentiment it challenged, in the immensity of law it both created and overthrew.”³ The origins of the *Brown* case stemmed from Topeka, Kansas. African Americans in the city avoided many of the crippling effects that defined the Jim Crow practices of many Southern towns. In the early 1950s, there was no color line in the waiting rooms of Topeka’s bus and train stations, nor were there racial seating assignments on the buses. However, five of the seven theaters were for whites only, and the public swimming pool was closed to African Americans except for a single day each year. One area of relative equality between blacks and whites was the city’s school facilities. Topeka boasted an educational system that was more “separate but equal” than most places in America. As proof, the city set up busing routes to assist black students who often had to travel further than white students to reach their schools. The schools for white children were typically within walking distance of their homes.⁴

In 1951, Linda Brown was a third-grader at Topeka’s all-black Monroe School. Her commute began each morning at 7:40 am. She walked through a dangerous railroad switching yard and crossed a busy commercial street before boarding a bus that took her the rest of the way to school. The segregated school system prevented Linda from attending the all-white Sumner School, which stood just seven blocks from

³ J. Harvie Wilkinson III, *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration, 1954-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 6.

⁴ James Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 32.

her house. Linda lived in a racially mixed neighborhood, but she had significantly more hardship reaching school than the white children in her community.⁵

Linda's father, Oliver Brown, was a quiet man who was far from a militant supporter of school desegregation. However, local activists from the NAACP saw in the lifelong Topeka resident, the background and personality that made him an ideal selection to challenge the racial status quo. He was thirty-two years old in 1951, a World War II veteran and an assistant pastor at the local Methodist church. As the legal case worked its way through the court system, Oliver Brown came to believe that his cause garnered God's favor. Over the next three years, Thurgood Marshall and his team of attorneys from the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund drove the *Brown* case through the court system, ultimately reaching the Supreme Court in 1954.⁶

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case of 1896 had established the constitutionality of racial segregation and the principle of "separate but equal."⁷ *Plessy* was a failed challenge to the segregated railroad car system in Louisiana. The court argued that there were biological differences between blacks and whites that were established by nature, not law and that prejudice against black people was so deeply seated and popularly held that no law could alter that reality. The decision stated that

⁵ Historian Rachel Devlin detailed many of the school cases that culminated in the *Brown* decision. She points to the fact that all but one was filed on behalf of girls. She stated that, "These girls and young women legitimized school desegregation in the eyes of an often dubious public and then volunteered to be firsts at formerly all-white schools in the early 1960s." Rachel Devlin, *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America's Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), xxi, xi; Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 32.

⁶ Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 34.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

the state could not force white people to associate with black people but must ensure that the facilities offered to both races were equal.⁸

Plessy did not directly address the American education system, but the directives of the “separate but equal” philosophy stood firm for the next fifty-eight years. In 1954, the Supreme Court struck down *Plessy* and, through the *Brown* decision, declared segregation in public space unconstitutional. On May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren read his official opinion asking, “Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race... deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities?” Warren answered his question by stating, “We believe that it does.”⁹ *Brown vs. Board of Education* struck down school segregation, but Southern segregationists did not give up without a fight. Many white Southerners began a campaign of “massive resistance” that heightened racial tension throughout the region.¹⁰

While not a participant in the public massive resistance campaigns, Bell crafted his own opposition to desegregation efforts. Upon his return from England, Bell’s immediate attention was not on *Brown* but instead on the growing attacks against

⁸ Richard White, *The Republic For Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 740-741.

⁹ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347, U.S. 483, (US Supreme Court, 1954), https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/347/483/USSC_PRO_347_483_1

¹⁰ The South produced various reactions to the *Brown* decision. Matthew Lassiter and Andrew Lewis state that some states like North Carolina, avoided the perils of open defiance of *Brown*, deciding to instead begin with minimal and gradual desegregation in select urban cities in order to avoid the crisis that developed in states like Virginia, Arkansas and states in the Deep South. Matthew Lassiter and Andrew Lewis, *The Moderates’ Dilemma: Massive Resistance to School Desegregation in Virginia* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 3; Clive Webb referenced the tactics of the Citizen Councils groups on the local level that applied financial pressure on black citizens and supporters of Civil Rights as well as the Southern members of the US House and Senate on the national level, who instituted their “Southern Strategy” to resist the Supreme Court’s ruling through every legal means possible. Clive Webb, *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4-5.

segregation that were surfacing within his denomination. He was troubled by the actions of the General Assembly and attempts by the governing body to eliminate segregation within the PCUS. In June of 1954, Bell wrote an editorial entitled "Take Care," in which he articulated a line of reasoning around desegregation, which claimed that any type of forced integration was inherently "unChristian." He began laying out what he saw were the differences between "abolishing segregation" and "imposing non-segregation." For the first time, Bell expressed his concern over the threat to white individual rights and the danger of forced integration.¹¹

The controversy which eventually led to Bell's "Take Care" editorial began in earnest a year before the *Brown* decision when the more socially conscious wing of the PCUS challenged the denomination's stance on segregationist practices. At the 1953 meeting of the General Assembly, the governing body adopted a generic and exceptionally ineffectual statement on desegregation. It offered a toothless admonition to "practice no discrimination" within the church but with no clear directives.¹² Within the more conservative wing of the PCUS, there was still significant opposition to the full inclusion of African Americans. A substantial portion of that opposition paternalistically claimed to care about the interests of blacks but did not support any real change to the racial status quo within the ranks of the denomination.¹³

Jack Ewart, a young Presbyterian minister from Radford, Virginia, insisted that the statement needed unambiguous instructions. He offered an amendment that read: "That the General Assembly... shall direct the trustees of all its institutions of higher

¹¹ L. Nelson Bell, "Take Care," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 13, no.7 (June 16, 1954): 3.

¹² Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South, Vol. 3, 1890-1972*, 538-539.

¹³ Alvis, *Religion & Race*, 49-50.

education to open its doors to all races. That the General Assembly strongly recommends the same action to synods and presbyteries. That the local churches be directed to practice no discrimination within [their] fellowship or outreach.” The polarizing topic of segregation was now on the floor of the General Assembly, but most members were not ready to tackle such an explosive issue. The 1953 General Assembly tabled the recommendation until the following year and tasked the denomination’s Council of Christian Relations to study and report on the situation.¹⁴

The Council began its work as *Brown v. Board* worked its way through the court system and delivered a report at the 1954 General Assembly that directly attacked the denomination’s segregationist past. The report stated, “that the General Assembly affirm that enforced segregation of the races is discrimination which is out of harmony with Christian theology.” The policy urged that PCUS institutions of higher education and denominational conference centers should no longer discriminate against African Americans. It also stated that the “local churches admit persons to membership and fellowship in the local church on the Scriptural basis of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ without reference to race.”¹⁵

On May 27, 1954, just ten days after the *Brown v. Board* decision, the General Assembly of the PCUS approved the recommendation made by the Council of Christian Relations by a vote of 239 to 169.¹⁶ The PCUS General Assembly became the first of the major Southern evangelical denominations to endorse *Brown*, but the Baptists and

¹⁴ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, Vol. 3, 1890-1972, 539.

¹⁵ Cited in Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, Vol. 3, 1890-1972, 539.

¹⁶ Thompson, *Presbyterians in the south*, Vol. 3, 1890-1972, 539.

Methodists soon followed.¹⁷ The General Assembly vote did not sit well with conservatives both in denomination leadership or its membership. Within the white Southern Church, members of the rank and file paid little heed to *Brown's* stipulations as a myriad of responses to the Supreme Court decision began to unfold.¹⁸ In his book *A Stone of Hope*, David Chapelle described the post-*Brown* reactions of Southern evangelicals. He stated that “the South broke not into two camps, but rather into hopeless disarray and confusion over racial matters.”¹⁹

In the wake of *Brown* and the PCUS affirmation of the decision, Bell envisioned desegregation not only as an infringement on the individual rights of white Southerners but also as a direct threat to racial purity. From Bell's perspective, the integration of schools would lead to an increase in interracial marriages. Bell feared an attack on the Southern racial status quo and the end of social barriers between impressionable young people. He closed his June 1954 editorial by sharing his concern over the practices of a Christian conference center located a short distance from Montreat, that intentionally paired black and white youth of different sexes together to play games and square dance. Bell did not identify the specific conference center in his editorial, but

¹⁷ At the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in 1954, the assembly voted overwhelming to support *Brown* but leaders of the organization and individual pastors failed to make any substantial stance against the massive resistance efforts of its members believing that active involvement in support of *Brown* would split the denomination. Mark Newman, *Getting Right With God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995*, (Tuscaloosa AL: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 23-25. In 1954, the Methodist House of Bishops also affirmed *Brown* indicating that the decision agreed with all the denomination's official pronouncements, including their support of the Social Creed. Elaine Allen Lehtreck, *Southern White Ministers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson, MS: The University of Mississippi Press, 2018), 12.

¹⁸ Lehtreck, *Southern White Ministers and the Civil Rights Movement*, 13-15.

¹⁹ Chapelle, *A Stone of Hope*, 107.

correspondences revealed that it was the Blue Ridge Assembly, located roughly three miles from Montreat, in Black Mountain, North Carolina.²⁰

The Blue Ridge Assembly, unlike its counterpart in Montreat, was one of the few places in the South during the first half of the twentieth century that fostered a relatively open and rational conversation about race.²¹ Although not “officially” integrated until 1952, the leadership of the Blue Ridge Assembly, consistently provided an opportunity for blacks and whites from around the country to discuss race relations on equal footing. The Assembly’s progress towards integration was slow and gradual but served as an example of a Southern organization that managed to directly address race relations without garnering the type of adverse reaction that might threaten the survival of the institution.²² In 1954, Bell took offense with a student conference at Blue Ridge Assembly that intentionally mixed races for conference activities. In the “Take Care” editorial, he wrote, “we can only protest that such, in the name of Christianity, is a gross injustice to these young people and a travesty on planned Christian conduct.” Intentionally placing young people of different races together not only drew Bell’s contempt because of his fears over interracial marriage but also because some Christians viewed the intermixing of races as appropriate “Christian conduct.” Bell could not accept the notion that authentic Christian behavior coincided directly with integration and that support of segregation was “unChristian.”²³

²⁰ Bell, “Take Care,” *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, (June 16, 1954): 3.; Letter from Thomas Miller to L. Nelson Bell, April 17, 1956, Box 36, Folder 10, CN 318: Records of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

²¹ Andrew McNeil Canady, *Willis Duke Weatherford: Race, Religion, and Reform in the American South* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 71.

²² *Ibid.*, 113.

²³ Bell, “Take Care,” *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, (June 16, 1954): 3.

In an August 1955 editorial, Bell outlined a more thorough critique of desegregation efforts and the PCUS General Assembly's recommendation. Entitled, "Christian Race Relations Must Be Natural, Not Forced," Bell presented an argument for segregation based on individual freedoms jointly founded in both the Christian faith and the inalienable rights bestowed upon the citizens of American society. Many Southern white Christians within Bell's sphere of influence turned to the editorial for insights into the contemporary racial unrest. The article became one of the most popular of his career, prompting the *Journal* to produce more than 35,000 reprints in just a few short months.²⁴

During the 1940s, segregation in public spaces was state-sponsored, but in the wake of *Brown*, Bell crafted an argument in support of segregation that met the new social and legal paradigm. He never wavered in his belief in the morality of segregation and wrote with unambiguous consistency in support of that notion. His case became more nuanced in the "Christian Race Relations" editorial. Bell used the editorial to promote the differences between integration that occurred naturally through gradual and "unforced" methods and the evils that stemmed from what he termed as "forced" integration. Bell designed a more complex racial analysis to fit the demands of a white Southern society coping with *Brown*. He also continued to believe that friendly and courteous behavior between the region's white and black citizens would go a long way in solving the South's racial problems.

²⁴ "Editor's Note," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, (December 28, 1955): 2.

After *Brown*, Bell accepted the legal fact that desegregation in the public arena was now the law of the land. He was a firm believer in the rule of law and, therefore, never promoted open rebellion against the *Brown* decision. He expressed a desire that the Supreme Court decision be overturned but only through legal means. Bell's tone and rhetoric never reached the point of massive resistance.²⁵ David Chapelle argued that Bell attempted to adopt a "reasonable conservative stance" on segregation. According to Chapelle, Bell did not want to risk *The Presbyterian Journal*, *Christianity Today*, his evangelism, or his conservatism in defense of segregation.²⁶

With *Brown* firmly in place, Bell began to distinguish between legal segregation and social segregation. As Bell wrote, the advent of the end of legal segregation "in no way precludes the expediency, wisdom and right of voluntary alignments along racial or other social lines. Forced integration cannot be defended, either on legal or moral grounds. Both forced segregation and forced integration infringe on the legal right of the individual." The crux of Bell's argument for social segregation in post-*Brown* America rested upon his belief in an individual's right to choose their own social, economic, and political relationships. From his perspective, the end of legal segregation did not mean an end to the necessity of social segregation if one so chose.²⁷

²⁵ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 169. Jones specifically addressed the reaction of the Southern Baptist Convention's response to the *Brown* decision but the concession to *Brown* mirrors the one shared by Bell.

²⁶ Chapelle, *A Stone of Hope*, 140.

²⁷ L. Nelson Bell, "Christian Race Relations Must Be Natural, Not Forced," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* 14, no. 16, (August 16, 1955): 3.

In the “Christian Race Relations” editorial of August 1955, Bell solidified his commitment to belief in the God-ordained nature of racial distinction. He wrote, “It is utterly foolish to think that wishful thinking, an act of the Supreme Court or an act of the General Assembly – any of these can destroy race distinctions which are God ordained.” Bell’s interpretation of Scripture allowed him to maintain these racial distinctions and balked at the prospect of government-sponsored integration.²⁸ He wrote, “Our dilemma is caused by those who would force an unnatural association, in the name of Christianity. The problem cannot be solved by force, either pro or con.” Bell also found disfavor with those who claimed that the only “Christian” perspective on race required belief in integration. He saw desegregation and integration, not in terms of a fundamental Christian principle, and therefore believed that churches that practiced segregation could also be genuinely “Christian” in nature. From Bell’s perspective, whether a church or an individual was “sinful” had no relevance upon their support or disapproval of segregation issues. Bell rejected the claim of those Church organizations that would “force” social relationships between the races under the auspice of “true Christianity.” His views on the conduct of the Blue Ridge Assembly’s student conference in 1954 demonstrated Bell’s disdain for this type of activity.²⁹

The idea of relying on “natural” interpersonal associations is a critical piece of Bell’s thesis but also complicates Bell’s views on segregation. He wrote, “Wherever it is the normal Christian thing to do so he is willing to accept any natural association. But, it

²⁸ Bell’s expressed his interpretation of the “bounds of habitation” in Acts 17 and the curse of Ham in Genesis 9 in an editorial he wrote in March of 1944. More detail into those theological views is found in chapter one of this study. Bell, “*Race Relations-Whither?*” (March 1944): 5.

²⁹ Bell, “Christian Race Relations Must Be Natural, Not Forced,” *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, (August 16, 1955): 3.

is his judgment that there is nothing Christian or natural in manufacturing situations for forced relationships whether those relationships be with people of the same race, or some other race.” Bell came to a theoretical conclusion that allowed for integration in specific settings as long as that integration resulted from “natural” and “unforced” circumstances. For instance, he concluded that those of different races could and even should become members of the same local church if those decisions are a “natural outgrowth.” On more than one occasion, Bell addressed the hypothetical situation of a black person joining his local church. In this scenario, he did not object to church membership for a black person as long as the person had natural ties to the church and the community. Bell objected to the idea of a black person with no “natural” links to his local church seeking membership.³⁰

Bell argued that racial issues “must be solved on the basis of local conditions, and in the light of what would be the natural contacts and alignments.” In other words, Bell believed that any change in racial consciousness or action must come from the hyperlocal level and that only through slow and gradual processes should racial matters be altered. This philosophy rested on his belief that there was “an inherent right of the individual to choose his or her own intimate friends and associates.” Bell went on to argue that these choices do “not imply anything derogatory to those not so chosen. When that barrier is broken either within or outside racial lines, the right of the individual is violated. It is the feeling that just such violation is contemplated by some which makes others both fearful and resentful.” Bell believed that the right of the individual to

³⁰ Bell, “Christian Race Relations Must Be Natural, Not Forced,” *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, (August 16, 1955): 3.

choose their social circle did not constitute discrimination; however, he did not wrestle with the connotations of these individual social decisions on a broader, more structural scale. Bell was content to view racial injustice only on a personal level. He was unable or unwilling to comprehend how these individual social choices perpetuated the fundamental nature of racism and inequality.³¹

After the interest in Bell's editorial, "Christian Race Relations," his notoriety in the realm of Southern race relations grew. Over the next few years, his correspondence between friends, supporters, and detractors often included questions about race and his stance on forced versus unforced desegregation. In 1956, Bell's growing acclaim presented him with an opportunity to serve as a member of a roundtable discussion on segregation held by the widely popular publication, *Life Magazine*. *Life* was a fixture of Americana during the 1950s. The magazine published its first edition in November of 1936, and the photojournalistic style of the publication led to instant success. *Life* quickly became the most popular and widely read magazine in America. In the 1940s and 1950s, its circulation numbers far exceeded its nearest competitor. In its first year, *Life* generated a weekly circulation of 1.6 million, with numbers moving upwards of 13.5 million the following decade.³²

Bell's inclusion in the roundtable discussion gave him a platform far beyond anything he could imagine with the *Southern Presbyterian Journal*. For the first time, his thoughts on race, segregation, and interracial relationships reached a broad,

³¹ Bell, "Christian Race Relations Must Be Natural, Not Forced," *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, (August 16, 1955): 3.

³² Melissa Renn, "Within Their Walls: LIFE Magazine's "Illuminations," *Archives of American Art Journal* 53, No. 1/2 (Spring 2014), 33.

national, and even secular audience, extending his views beyond a predominantly Southern Presbyterian readership. The members of the roundtable were all influential Southern church leaders and represented the major denominations of the South, including Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians. The roundtable contributors represented a mix of Southern views on the segregation issue. The ten members of the roundtable included nine white men and one white woman. An African American voice was noticeably absent. Bell was one of the more conservative members of the panel and had several polite disagreements with those who held a more progressive view on integration. The roundtable met several times over three days, and a summary of the discourse appeared in the October 1, 1956 edition of *Life*.³³

The moderator of the discussion was Stanley High, a senior editor of the *Reader's Digest*. The initial conversations hinged around the legal, spiritual, and social components of segregation. The roundtable also explored the moral implications of segregation and the Church's specific role in addressing racial matters. *Life* described segregation as a "great Christian dilemma." The roundtable quickly came to a consensus that "enforced segregation" was indefensible from a Biblical perspective. One participant even suggested that the interpretation of the Bible as a defense of segregation practices was a misuse of Scripture.³⁴

After agreeing on the Biblical stance on enforced segregation, High directed the roundtable participants to the moral duty of Christians when faced with questions over segregation. Several participants mentioned their denomination's response to the

³³ "Round Table Has Debate On Christians' Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches' role," *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 139.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

Brown v. Board decision. Bishop Paul Garber, the resident bishop in Richmond, Virginia, detailed the work the Methodist Church did in the months before the *Brown* decision. Those efforts paralleled many of the same recommendations made by the PCUS during their General Assembly of 1954. The Methodist General Council stated that “to discriminate against a person solely upon the basis of his race is both unfair and unchristian... There must be no place in the Methodist Church for racial discrimination or enforced segregation.” However, Garber brought attention to a weakness that stretched across the polity of denominations in the South. He noted that the Methodist General Conference, which compares similarly to the General Assembly of the PCUS, did not bind individual congregations or the members who attended those churches. “The final decision within Methodism,” Garber stated, “on this and other similar problems rests with each individual member.”³⁵ The Methodist leadership, like that of the PCUS, often had limited power at the local level. In the matter of eliminating discrimination and segregation practices, it was not uncommon for the Church polity of the South to be more progressive than the individuals and local churches who made up the denomination.³⁶

Bell briefly stated that the PCUS had made similar recommendations after the *Brown* decision but did not mention his disapproval with his denomination’s decision. He quickly pivoted the discussion to talk about his belief in the undeniable differences between the races. Bell stated that “the ardent integrationists should admit that racial differences exist, certainly along anthropological lines. Take the specific fact of physical

³⁵ “Round Table Has Debate On Christians’ Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches’ role,” *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 140,143.

³⁶ Lehtreck, *Southern White Ministers and the Civil Rights Movement*, 13-15

differences which do, after all, exist.” Bell went on to say that “we are different. God made robins; He made thrushes; He made bluebirds, and so on. They are all birds, but they are different. God made the Mongolian, the Negro and the Caucasian races. We are God’s children, but we are different. That should be admitted because not to admit it, my friends, is pretty foolish.” Bell points to his belief that there are distinct “anthropological” differences between the races. He did not explicitly clarify what those differences might be, but this leads directly to Bell’s foundational belief in both biological and cultural differences between the races. This distinct line of anthropological reasoning offers insight into why Bell so fervently believed in segregation as well as his insistence that interracial marriage was against God’s mandate.³⁷

Bell discussed one of his favorite and often used analogies for segregation during this portion of the *Life* roundtable. In several correspondences during the mid to late 1950s, Bell suggested that God’s belief in the segregation of human races was directly comparable to the way birds interact only with their species. In a letter he penned to Julius Lonn in September of 1955, Bell referred to a recent article he wrote for the *Asheville Citizen-Times* in which he mentioned the “God-ordained distinctions” between races. In the letter, Bell stated that it is an indisputable fact that there are four distinct races: Red, Yellow, Black, and White. He echoed his analogy from the bird kingdom, suggesting that God designed humans to operate in segregated environments similarly to birds that maintained strict alignment with their kind. Like most arguments Bell made on behalf of segregation, the impetus was on the issue of interracial

³⁷ “Round Table Has Debate On Christians’ Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches’ role,” *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 143.

marriage. In the letter to Lonn, Bell used the bird analogy to castigate those who supported interracial marriage in the name of Christianity. As Bell expressed to Lonn and many others, any mixing of races or crossing of racial lines would lead to loss and detriment.³⁸ Bell did not expound on precisely what that loss and detriment might be.

The *Life* roundtable discussion also showcased clarity in Bell's argument regarding the distinct differences between legal, spiritual, and social segregation. He stated, "I think much of our trouble, not only in the South but elsewhere, is that we confuse the spiritual issue, the legal issue, and the social issue. Legally the Negro has absolutely the same rights as I, and where those rights are withheld they should be established. Spiritually, the Negro is as precious in God's sight as I or any man can be. Socially, however, the problem is different. There the individual has the right of choice. That has been true in every society." Bell's belief in the individual right to choose shaped his argument for social segregation. He argued that the freedom granted by God, as well as the American way of life, provided individuals with the opportunity to select their social circle and their relationships to institutions like the church, schools, organizations, and businesses. However, during the *Life* roundtable discussion, Bell received significant push back on this concept and was directly confronted by the lone woman participating on the panel, Mrs. Spann W. Milner.³⁹

Mrs. Milner served as vice president for the Church Women United (CWU) organization. Founded in 1941, the organization strove for racial, cultural, and

³⁸ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to J.M. Lonn, September 8, 1955, Box 32, Folder 12, CN 318: L. Nelson Bell Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton (IL).

³⁹ "Round Table Has Debate On Christians' Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches' role," *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 143.

theological inclusion of women in the American religious landscape. Eleanor Roosevelt was the highest-profile member of the CWU and was actively engaged in their efforts.⁴⁰ Milner and Bell tussled on more than one occasion during the roundtable, and she pushed back on Bell's notion of individual freedom to choose one's social circle. Milner responded by asking Bell two provoking questions: "Wouldn't you say that the Negro must also have the right of choice? And doesn't the evil begin when we make the choosing entirely the white man's prerogative?" Milner exposed a flaw in Bell's reasoning, which rested on a racial hierarchy where whites could choose their social contacts across the breadth of the racial spectrum, but segregation kept blacks from doing the same. Milner referenced a power and privilege structure in American society, which favored white men, like those that surrounded her at the roundtable discussion.⁴¹

Bell responded to Milner's questions by stating, "I agree. But I am convinced that if the Negro were admitted to his full legal and spiritual rights, he, along with the white man, will seek and find those social alignments and relationships which are logical and natural." Bell remained vague as to what those legal and spiritual rights might be but argued that once achieved, African Americans would enjoy the same privileges as whites within the framework of a segregated world. Bell made a habit of speaking on behalf of African Americans and what he believed they wanted. His paternalistic perspective frequently led to a disconnect with the real plight of African Americans living under the confines of the nation's racial hierarchy. Bell's conclusion fundamentally led

⁴⁰ "Our History," Church Women United, accessed June 27, 2020, <https://www.churchwomenunited.net/our-history>.

⁴¹ "Round Table Has Debate On Christians' Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches' role," *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 143.

to a belief that blacks could freely choose their social relationships but only within the constraints of their place in the hierarchy. Only whites had the power to select relationships across the expanse of the racial spectrum.⁴²

Bell and Milner disagreed again later in the roundtable discussion over a particular subject that spoke to Bell's belief in the detachment of the Church from social issues. Mrs. Milner stated, "the church people do find themselves in a dilemma; I don't think there's any doubt about that. There are people on directly opposite sides of this question who feel themselves equally guided by Christian conviction. But I feel that on this question that the church is losing tremendous opportunity to lead. It seems to me to be one of the primary tasks facing the church today." Bell responded by taking exception to Mrs. Milner's statement. He stated that engagement on social issues like segregation is "not one of the primary tasks of the church. The primary task of the church is the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ for the redemption of individuals; and these social moral and ethical problems are by-products that come out of that. There are some ministers who have become so obsessed with this one problem that they have forgotten there are more basic matters which must take priority if right social relationships are to be established." Bell grounded this conversation with Milner on his belief that teaching personal salvation was the core responsibility of the Church and that social engagement detracted from the emphasis on conversion. Bell believed that only the conversion of millions of Americans could solve the nation's social issues. He directly linked the rise of conversions to the reduction of discrimination along racial

⁴² "Round Table Has Debate On Christians' Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches' role," *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 143.

lines. However, based on Bell's understanding, even the conversion of all Americans and the total elimination of racial prejudice would not end his support for a segregated society.⁴³

Another roundtable member, Dr. Duke McCall, pushed back against Bell's belief in the disengagement of the church in social areas. At the time of the *Life* roundtable, McCall served as the president of the Southern Baptist Seminary. He was an avid proponent of desegregation and later the Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁴ In response to Bell's comment regarding social engagement, McCall stated, "Baptists in the South do not content themselves with saying, 'I am a Christian, so I automatically do what is right.' Baptist churches say, 'You can't stop here. You are a Christian. You must attempt to apply all of Christ's teaching to everyday living.'" McCall also pointed to the flaw he saw in the institution of the Church. He stated that "the church always has and perhaps always will fall far short of the gospel which it proclaims." McCall acknowledged the humanity of the Church and the propensity of human beings to fall short of the standards to which they aspire. Bell believed in an almost utopian society where racial problems would cease to exist once the number of conversions reached a certain point. Both McCall and Milner recognized the inherent failure of individuals and that "saving souls," and social engagement was not a mutually exclusive proposition. Bell believed in a zero-sum game that saw a direct correlation between the social engagement of the Church and spiritual conversions. The more time churches spent weaving through the

⁴³ "Round Table Has Debate On Christians' Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches' role," *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 143.

⁴⁴ "Former Seminary President Duke McCall Dies," *The Christian Index*, accessed June 27, 2020, <http://www.tciarchive.org/8765.article>

quagmire of social justice issues, the less time they actively engaged in preaching the gospel and in evangelistic attempts designed to win new converts.⁴⁵

After Dr. McCall's concluding statement on the Church, the *Life* roundtable discussion shifted to the matter of public schools. Bishop Garber, from the Methodist Church in Richmond, Virginia, stated, "One result of the Supreme Court decision may be the destruction or at least the weakening of the public school system of the South, and this will affect all racial groups in the South. In many states the people will turn to private schools before they will have integrated public schools. The destruction of the public school system would be tragic." Dr. A.C. Miller, the executive secretary for the Southern Baptist Convention's Commission on Christian Relations, followed McCall's comments. Miller stated that "the people who live in, let us say, certain communities of the Mississippi Delta, look at the Negroes nearby and say: 'These people are inferior.' The local evidence seems to support that conclusion. They seem to be inferior from the standpoint of health, cleanliness and morality. Academically we have fallen so far short of the separate but equal provisions of the law that the average Negro child in such communities is from one to three years behind the white child of the same age." Miller, another proponent of desegregation and crusader for black equality within Southern Christianity, recognized the discrepancy between two separate and blatantly unequal education systems: one white and one black. He continued, "my point is that when we argue from those facts that the Negro is congenitally inferior than we are hypocritical. The fact is that we have denied to vast numbers of our Negro fellow citizens any

⁴⁵ "Round Table Has Debate On Christians' Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches' role," *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 145.

opportunity to rise in the scale and thereby to wipe out these obvious differences of health, cleanliness, morality, and academic standing.” Miller acknowledged that African Americans, in general, were less prepared for success because of a long history of white oppression. He closed his comment by saying, “we will never solve the problem of segregation until we recognize that the arguments for continuing segregation are a product of situations for which as Christians we must bear some responsibility.” Miller did not provide context to help clarify his closing comment but did place Christians and some of their segregationist's ways in his crosshairs.⁴⁶

After Miller's comments, Bell turned to Mrs. Milner and asked, “Suppose your grandchildren lived in a community where there are eight times as many Negro as white children. What would your attitude be toward school integration there?” Milner indicated that the hypothetical scenario Bell described would give her pause, but she confirmed in her response the differences she held with Bell. Milner responded, “I would be obliged to face the facts already pointed out that the differences which made it difficult for me to consent to integration were differences largely due to the fact that the separate but equal phrase has been enforced as far as the separateness but never, or only rarely, as far as equality is concerned.” Milner had a firm grasp on the educational disparities between whites and blacks in the South, unlike Bell, who would not admit to the inequality in the Southern educational system.⁴⁷

Bell responded to Milner by quoting statistics in North Carolina. He argued that “the average pay of the Negro schoolteacher is higher than the average pay of the white

⁴⁶ “Round Table Has Debate On Christians’ Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches’ role,” *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 151.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

schoolteacher for the state public schools because in proportion there are more Negroes with M.A. degrees in education, and so the average pay is higher. Now, if integration comes in the schools, it is going to work a hardship, so far as the Negro teachers are concerned, because many of them won't be able to keep their jobs."⁴⁸ Bell's concern for African American teachers was justified, and he did prove to be correct as a significant number of African American teachers lost their jobs during the era of school desegregation. However, Bell's ostensible concern for African American teachers was a thinly veiled attempt to prove the equality of black education without commenting on his primary reason for maintaining segregation of public schools: preventing the increased likelihood of interracial relationships.⁴⁹

Milner responded directly to Bell's comments by indicating that the situation in the South was troubling, and she placed direct blame upon the Southern white community. She said, "We have not shown good faith in trying to take the first step to solve [racial problems]. If we would meet with Negroes in local communities and say, "Here, now, we want to work out these terrific problems that you can certainly see, as well as we: - I am certain we would find them most reasonable. But instead of that we have resisted almost consistently every single one of the issues that has been brought up, because of this Supreme Court decision." Milner continued to play the role of Bell's

⁴⁸ "Round Table Has Debate On Christians' Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches' role," *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 151.

⁴⁹ David Cecelski analyzed the effects of the *Brown* decision on African American educational institutions. The court tasked the implementation of *Brown* to local schoolboards and those schoolboards turned segregation into a one-way street. Black leadership in the form of principals and teachers were devastated. From 1963-1970 black principals in North Carolina's elementary schools fell from 620 to 170. Black teachers in North Carolina faced a similar fate. By 1972, 3,021 black teachers lost their jobs after the merger between black and white schools. David Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools in the South*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 7-8.

chief antagonist, offering moral clarity and forethought in comparison to Bell's soon to be antiquated segregationist beliefs. She did not view the post-*Brown* environment with rose-colored glasses. Milner understood that solving racial problems would not magically occur overnight. She implored Southern leaders to consider biracial committees to investigate the intricacies of racial issues within individualized communities.⁵⁰

On the second morning of the roundtable discussion, Bell presented a written statement to his fellow panel members that summarized his belief in social segregation. The report included eight points that detailed Bell's argument. First, he confirmed that the "segregation of the races by law is both unchristian and un-American." In the wake of the *Brown* decision, Bell affirmed the notion that forced segregation was immoral. Second, Bell argued that "it can be demonstrated with equal force that forced integration of the races is sociologically impracticable and at the same time such forced alignments violate the right of personal choice." Bell suggested that forced integration, like forced segregation, was equally immoral and that any attempts to force integration infringed upon both the God-given and American individual right to choose social circles. Third, Bell stated that God made no distinctions between people regarding spiritual matters. Bell argued that all men, regardless of skin color, had equal spiritual standing before God and that church membership should be open to all without any restrictions or discrimination.⁵¹

⁵⁰ "Round Table Has Debate On Christians' Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches' role," *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 151.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

In Bell's fourth point, he clarified his position on church membership. Despite his belief that all churches should be willing to accept members from a different race, in "most areas and under normal conditions, this will not result in an integrated church, for various races will prefer separate churches for social, economic, educational and many other reasons." Bell argued that whites and blacks would come to their own conclusions and decide to worship within the confines of their race. Bell believed that opening church doors to anyone would "break down the man-made and sinful barrier which stems from prejudice and recognize the unquestioned Christian principle of man's uniform need of God's redemptive work in Christ, a need and a salvation which knows no distinction of race or color." Bell argued that churches should be open to any who desired to join but questioned the situation that would naturally lead blacks to attend white churches and vice versa.⁵²

Bell's fifth point spoke to his belief that despite equality under the eyes of God, the races were inherently different and that fostering social integration between races was less than desirable. Although God held no distinction between races, Bell believed that the social differences he perceived justified voluntary separation. Bell's sixth point focused on his desire to see the Church concentrate its energy on condemning the sinful behavior of the individual and the prejudice and discrimination that stem from a

⁵² "Round Table Has Debate On Christians' Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches' role," *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 160; Martin Luther King had a different perspective from Bell concerning the integration of churches. In an interview on the NBC television news show *Meet the Press*, King stated, "I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours, in Christian America. I definitely think the Christian church should be integrated, and any church that stands against integration and that has a segregated body is standing against the spirit and the teachings of Jesus Christ, and it fails to be a true witness." Martin Luther King interviewed by Ned Brooks, Lawrence Spivak, Anthony Lewis, May Craig, and Frank Van Der Linden, April 17, 1960, *Meet the Press*, The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/interview-meet-press>.

person's heart. This belief showcased his understanding that the solution to social problems began and ended with the individual and that broad structural change would occur only when individual hearts changed first.⁵³

The seventh point of Bell's statement addressed the public school dilemma. Bell chastised Northerners who did not understand that problems in the South were often more "ratio" driven than racial. He wrote, "Because ratio of the races varies in different localities the problem also varies from the simple in some areas to the apparently insoluble at the present time in others. Those who live where only ten or fifteen percent of the population is a minority race have no serious problem. Where that ratio is reversed the issue is one of the greatest magnitude and those who have to deal with it deserve the sympathetic concern and understanding of others." Bell's underlying white supremacy seeps through in his argument regarding ratios. From his perspective, a majority white population could handle desegregation issues without too much concern. However, Bell was incredibly fearful for white Southerners that lived in areas dominated by African Americans. He suggested that those white families should garner the "sympathetic concern and understanding" of the South's people because their situation was one of great concern. Bell did not offer the same "sympathetic concern and understanding" for the African American families who lived in an area with a white majority.⁵⁴

⁵³ "Round Table Has Debate On Christians' Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches' role," *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 160.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Letter to Jerome Harrington from L. Nelson Bell, January 9, 1957, Box 27, Folder 26, CN318: L. Nelson Bell Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

The concern for those particular white families stemmed from his belief in the cultural inferiority of African Americans. He stated that “it must be recognized by both church and state that at this time, and under present conditions, the problem involves social, moral, hygienic, educational and other factors which admit no immediate or easy solution, and the phrase, ‘with all deliberate speed,’ must be interpreted on the one hand as requiring an honest effort to solve the problem and on the other by the leniency and consideration which existing conditions demand.” Bell accepted the notion that because of perceived cultural inferiority, separating white children from black children was of utmost importance. It is interesting to note that in Bell’s statement at the *Life* roundtable, he did not mention his fears over interracial relationships but instead argued that the social, moral, hygienic, and educational deficiencies of blacks made integration a problematic endeavor.⁵⁵

Bell’s directed his final point to the Church. He declared that the Church had a grave responsibility to proclaim justice, tolerance, and love in both theory and practice. He called on the Church to remove all barriers of spiritual fellowship without forcing unnatural social relationships. Bell concluded that members of all races deserved full spiritual and legal rights. He believed that African Americans were equal with whites under American law and in God’s eyes but that the cultural inferiority of blacks justified attempts by whites to separate themselves from the black population if they so desired.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Round Table Has Debate On Christians’ Moral Duty: Individuals must act, southern churchmen agree, but differ on churches’ role,” *Life Magazine* (October 1, 1956): 160.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

In the final years of the 1950s, Bell became increasingly frustrated with some African Americans and their calls for integration. He believed that far too many African Americans were demanding a level of social recognition that they did not deserve. Bell did not provide specifics as to what social recognition he referred to but was annoyed with some who believed that *Brown v. Board* and other civil rights initiatives might offer African Americans a social status that they had yet to achieve on their own. He argued that even if blacks won every court battle and legal decision that those victories would not automatically result in social acceptance. Bell was not ready to accept any culturally inferior group on an equal social standing. Bell's paternalistic tendencies prevented him from feeling animosity towards individuals who had not attained his level of social status. Still, he pushed back against the concept that the *Brown* decision automatically leveled the social playing field. However, Bell did make a distinction for African Americans who had reached a certain level of success. For those more fortunate and prosperous African Americans, Bell acknowledged that they deserved an equal footing in social circles.⁵⁷

In the fall of 1958, at a crusade led by son-in-law Billy Graham, Bell witnessed what he believed was the perfect example of racial interaction. By the time Billy Graham took to the podium at the 1958 crusade in Charlotte, North Carolina he had led over seventy-five crusades, become an international figure, was on good terms with President Eisenhower, and was a close friend and supporter of the Vice President and soon to be the Republican nominee in the 1960 presidential election, Richard Nixon.

⁵⁷ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Walter Powell, February 23, 1959, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: L. Nelson Bell Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

Bell was a staunch defender of Graham and frequently claimed that the two shared identical views on segregation issues.⁵⁸ Fundamentalists, like Carl McIntire and Bob Jones, Sr., were quick to accuse both Graham and Bell of selling out to liberal theology and not holding a more militant defense of segregation. The 1958 Crusade in Charlotte, North Carolina, upset the sensitivity of the fundamentalist who believed in the strict enforcement of segregation. The debate became so heated that the governor of South Carolina, George Timmerman, protested Graham's speaking event scheduled for the lawn of the State Capitol in Columbia because he believed that Graham was a staunch integrationist. Timmerman stated: "As a widely known evangelist and native Southerner, [Graham's] endorsement of racial mixing has done much harm and his presence here on State House property will be misinterpreted as approval of that endorsement." Timmerman went on to say that "Already the program to mix the races in the South has brought heartbreak and suffering to countless numbers of parents, both white and Negro. It also has brought racial tensions to areas where peace, understanding and goodwill formerly prevailed. The State House and its grounds belong to all the people of South Carolina and the opposition of both races to racial mixing should be respected."⁵⁹ Bell thought that Bob Jones Sr., the president and

⁵⁸ Bell was often tasked with responding to letters from disgruntled Graham supporters who were frustrated over what many perceived were Graham's integrationist ways. Bell would routinely respond with affirmation that Bell and Graham shared identical views believing that both forced segregation and integration were morally wrong. Steven Miller argued that Bell heavily influenced Graham's views on race particularly in the latter half of the 1950s. Miller stated that Bell served as a "conservative brake" on Graham's racial perspectives. Miller went on to suggest that Bell would often misrepresent or exaggerate Graham's positions on race and interject his own when corresponding with those who wrote to Graham. Bell never once acknowledged to Graham's supporters that Graham's support of moderate anti-Jim Crow rulings or his belief in the obedience to judicial rulings on civil rights. Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 19, 61-62.

⁵⁹ Charles Wickenberg, "Billy's Plan for Rally at S.C. State House 'Shocks' Timmerman, *The Charlotte Observer*, October 12, 1958.

founder of the fundamentalist institution Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina, had convinced Timmerman that Graham supported “forced integration.”⁶⁰

The fundamentalist uproar against Graham’s Charlotte crusade showed the complicated nature of Bell’s segregationist views and how he and Graham experienced pushback from both the fundamentalist on one side and the more liberal faction of the Church on the other. The crusade took place between September 21 and October 25. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association indicated that the total attendance for the five-week-long event was 423,387. The Charlotte Coliseum was filled each night with overflow crowds watching the event on closed-circuit television next door in the Ovens Auditorium.⁶¹ Pictures of the meetings show an overwhelming predominance of white attendees, but as Bell noted in several correspondences, there were a few small pockets of African Americans in the crowd and even some in the enormous volunteer choir.⁶²

In a letter Bell wrote during the Crusade, he stated that segregation was not a topic of conversation at the crusade. He indicated that the matter simply did not come up. Based on Bell’s observation, there were about twenty-five or thirty African Americans in the 1,500 member choir, as well as a sprinkling of blacks throughout the

⁶⁰ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to A.C. Miller, October 13, 1958, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: L. Nelson Bell Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL). Timmerman did allow Graham to preach to a desegregated crowd but not on the lawn of the state capital. Graham used a different location. Chapelle, *A Stone of Hope*, 141.

⁶¹ “The Coliseum Sermons From Billy Graham’s 1958 Charlotte Evangelistic Meetings,” Billy Graham Archives, Wheaton (IL), <https://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/docs/bg-charlotte/charlotte.htm>.

⁶² “Images of the 1958 Charlotte Crusade,” Billy Graham Archives, Wheaton (IL), <https://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/docs/bg-charlotte/photos.html>

audience.⁶³ In another letter, he described a real Christian spirit amongst the crowd.⁶⁴ Since the crusade did not enforce either integration or segregation, Bell noticed that black attendees typically sat together both in the crowd and in the choir. Bell mentioned that there was great Christian harmony in the audience, that many black attendees came forward to make a public decision for Christ, and that the newspaper in Charlotte made no mention of anything racial in their reports.⁶⁵

The 1958 Charlotte Crusade proved to be an ideal example of racial harmony in Bell's mind. For him, race was not an issue at the event, and both whites and blacks made their own conscious decisions to separate themselves from the other race in a natural way based on their individual choice. From Bell's perspective, the fewer people, organizations, and the media discussed race, the better.

Soon other concerns besides race would animate Bell's thoughts. As America left the 1950s behind and moved into a new decade, racial matters took a back seat to other social and political issues in Bell's editorials. Much of his writings centered around his contempt for the rise of communism in China, the National Council of Churches' liberal political leanings, and his fear of a Roman Catholic becoming president in the 1960 election. A developing Civil Rights Movement only drew occasional attention from Bell in the first few years of the 1960s. In 1961, he mentioned the Freedom Riders, questioning their motives and concluding that their philosophy held no solution for

⁶³ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to A.C. Miller, October 13, 1958, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: L. Nelson Bell Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

⁶⁴ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Edward Jones, October 21, 1958, Box 15, Folder 15, CN 318: L. Nelson Bell Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

⁶⁵ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to W.E. Kibler, November 1, 1958, Box 15, Folder 15, CN 318: L. Nelson Bell Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

Southern racial problems.⁶⁶ However, as the decade progressed, civil rights issues became more prevalent in Bell's mind. The rise of Martin Luther King and the grassroots movement for civil rights would move Bell back into the thick of racial analysis by the mid-1960s.

⁶⁶ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to John W. Wilde, August 21, 1961, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: L. Nelson Bell Papers, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

CHAPTER 3: BELL AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1963-1973

In August of 1965, leaders and laypeople of the Southern Presbyterian Church gathered in Montreat for the Christian Action Conference. Organizers sought to address the growing racial tensions that gripped the nation and, more specifically, the role and response of the Church in an increasingly troubled environment. The pre-conference sentiments expressed a substantial division amongst Southern Presbyterians. L. Nelson Bell was one of the staunchest critics of the conference and objected explicitly to the core political and social beliefs of the keynote speaker, Martin Luther King, Jr. King argued that the church had a moral obligation to engage injustice through political action, and that position brought King within Bell's crosshairs. King's advocacy of civil disobedience through planned nonviolent protests directly conflicted with Bell's unwavering belief in law and order.¹

In April of 1965, Bell led a contingent of anti-King Southern Presbyterians at the meeting of the PCUS General Assembly. The group desired to revoke King's invitation to speak at the Christian Action Conference. An intense debate over the issue included numerous shouts and bursts of applause from those on both sides. Bell argued that King's appearance would set back the work of Southern ministers as they

¹ In a 1957 speech, King described the Church as the "guardian of the moral and spiritual life of the community" and that the Church could not simply look at the injustices of American society with indifference. In that speech, King hoped that the individual leaders of the Southern churches would help solve the problems of inequality but showed little faith in them to do so. Martin Luther King, "The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma," (April 25, 1957), The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/role-church-facing-nation-s-chief-moral-dilemma-address-delivered-25-april>. In "Letter From Birmingham Jail," King calls on white moderates to support the moral and direct action of civil disobedience against unjust laws and accused them of being content with maintaining the status quo. Martin Luther King, *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2018).

tackled the racial problems of the region. A reverend from Montgomery, Alabama, suggested that King be allowed to speak but that a segregationist also be invited to counter King's position. A white Presbyterian layman made the charge that King would use the Montreat platform simply to make a political propaganda speech. An African American minister from Washington D.C. offered a rebuttal stating that only King's nonviolent campaign saved the South from greater violence.²

One of King's most ardent supporters during the General Assembly meeting was Jon K. Crow of Birmingham, Alabama. The missionary to Brazil gave an impassioned plea for tolerance, stating that the racial discrimination against blacks in America negatively affected his moral standing on the mission field. He stated, "The church has a chance to proclaim to Martin Luther King and to the world that God cares."³ Despite Bell's efforts, the words of Jon Crow, backed by the more overall progressive nature of the General Assembly, cleared King's path to Montreat. The Assembly voted 311-120 in support of King's appearance. The vote served as a racial barometer for the leadership of the Southern Presbyterian Church and pushed Bell and his conservative views into the denomination's minority.⁴

In the days leading up to the Christian Action Conference, Bell wrote an editorial in *The Presbyterian Journal* that attacked King's methods of protest without explicitly mentioning his name. Bell wrote that "the Church is in grave danger when she steps

² Don McKee, "Presbyterians Delay Vote on Racial Policy," *Asheville Citizen-Times* (April 25, 1965).

³ "Presbyterian Conservatives Defeated on Dr. King Issue," *St. Petersburg Times* (April 25, 1965).

⁴ McKee, "Presbyterians Delay Vote on Racial Policy," *Asheville Citizen-Times* (April 25, 1965).

into the arena of social issues to solve them by political pressure, demonstrations and the like.”⁵

This chapter will investigate Bell’s response to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. It will analyze Bell’s interpretation of several critical events, including the demonstrations in Birmingham during 1963, the march to Selma in 1965, and King’s death and the subsequent riots in 1968 as well as the landmark legislative acts of the decade. Bell viewed these events through not just a theologically conservative perspective but more profoundly through the lens of a political conservative. Bell’s objection to King’s interpretation of the moral responsibility of the Church and the means and methods King employed highlight Bell’s interaction with race during the 1960s. Throughout the decade, Bell’s theological belief in the centrality of individual conversion echoed his conservative political adherence to a racialized version of white individual rights. Bell was entirely on board with the concept of “law and order” and consistently wrote against King’s implementation of civil disobedience strategies.

In several correspondences during the summer months of 1965, Bell offered more explicit opposition to King’s Montreat visit. In late April, Bell responded to a letter from Mrs. C.H. Hall from Smyrna, Tennessee. Hall had invoked the words of Harry Truman, calling King a “troublemaker” and “rabble-rouser” and hoped that Bell would have success in canceling King’s invitation to Montreat.⁶ In Bell’s response, he refrained from name-calling but stated that his opposition to King went deeper than

⁵ L. Nelson Bell, “The Spiritual Task of the Church” *The Presbyterian Journal* 24, no. 16 (August 18, 1965): 13. *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* officially changed its name to *The Presbyterian Journal* in October 1957.

⁶ Letter from C.H. Hall to L. Nelson Bell, April 25, 1965, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL). “Truman Gives Views on Dr. King and Klan,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 1965.

Hall's concerns. Bell indicated that he would not put those deeper concerns into the letter.⁷

In May, Bell wrote a letter to Jon Crow, the Brazilian missionary who stood up for King at the General Assembly the month before. Bell was anxious to reach out to Crow regarding their disagreement. Bell believed that Crow misinterpreted his position on Martin Luther King's visit to Montreal. Bell stated that he shared nearly all of Crow's concerns about American racial problems and the repercussions those problems caused with the Church's work overseas. Bell insisted that his objection to King was one that he could only tell Crow in a personal conversation. He dared not put his specific thoughts on paper. Bell indicated that he had evidence from unimpeachable sources concerning King but that he was not at liberty to say what that evidence might be.⁸

Based on his correspondences in the summer of 1965, it is unclear what information Bell had in his possession that caused him hesitation, but his deep-seated distrust of King was apparent. The evidence was sensitive enough in Bell's mind that he decided not to mention it during the discussion forum at the General Assembly. Bell's distrust of King continued in letters throughout the summer.⁹ In June, Bell wrote

⁷ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to C.H. Hall, April 28, 1965, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

⁸ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Jon Crow, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

⁹ Jay Edgar Hoover wrote nine articles for *Christianity Today* while serving as the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Those articles typically had an anti-communist message. Hoover's attempts at blackmailing King and derailing the Civil Rights Movement stemmed from his fears of communist infiltration into King's inner circle. Hoover routinely offered classified information to public figures, including Graham. Influenced by Hoover, Billy Graham became convinced that King's organization was a part of the global communist agenda. Mark Galli, "Where We Got It Wrong," *Christianity Today* 62, no. 10 (December 2018): 28. Michael G. Long, *Billy Graham and the Beloved Community: America's Evangelist and the Dream of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 132.; Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South*, 94.

that King's proposed use of "nonviolent" tactics contradicted his real intent, which was creating violence and then capitalizing on it. Regarding the Montreat appearance, the letter showed that Bell feared the onslaught of King supporters and protesters alike and, more specifically, the threat of violence that might infringe upon the peaceful Montreat cove.¹⁰

Initially scheduled to give the opening keynote address at the Christian Action Conference on Thursday, August 19, King delayed his trip to Montreat because he was on the ground, helping to manage the chaotic events surrounding the Watts riots in Los Angeles. The turmoil in the Watts district began a week and a half before the start of the conference, and it became unclear whether King would be able to speak in Montreat. Bell looked at King's delay as a blessing and hoped that he would cancel the speaking engagement.¹¹ King hesitated to leave Los Angeles, but as tensions on the ground alleviated, his focus turned towards Montreat. He left the burning embers of a black community starving for racial justice and made his way to the mountains of Western North Carolina to make his case for change in front of a lily-white crowd of religious leaders. King knew how vitally important it was to convince white Southern religious leaders of the need for racial reconciliation and broad structural change. Frustrated by this religious contingent, King often saved his greatest contempt for those racial moderates who held positions of leadership in Southern churches. King railed

¹⁰ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Lucy Gardner, June 11, 1965, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL). Adam Fairclough stated that the SCLC did anticipate white violence against protestors in places like Birmingham, St. Augustine, and Selma and that the organization used that violent white response to their advantage. Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference & Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 7).

¹¹ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Howard H. Thompson, August 21, 1965, Box 52, Folder 8, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

against their belief in gradual change and, as a result, their refusal to take any meaningful stand for justice.¹²

After some uncertainty, King made the flight from Los Angeles to the Asheville airport and then traveled the thirty miles to Montreat by car. The pristine beauty of the mountainous region of North Carolina was a sharp contrast to the devastation in the Watts district. However, despite the change in locations, King was unable to avoid the threat of violence. The local sheriff indicated that he had received reports that outside violent hate groups were planning on demonstrating and “law-breaking” during King’s speech.¹³ King received police protection throughout his short trip to North Carolina, and ultimately there were no incidents of violence or demonstrations.

King delivered his speech, entitled “The Church on the Frontier of Racial Tension,” in front of 2,500 people in a packed Anderson Auditorium. After offering an apology for his delay, King proceeded to discuss the critical role of the Christian Church and its leaders during the present days of racial turmoil. He described the problem of racism as a moral issue. King argued that the Church was not only the moral guardian of the community but also responsible for leading the fight for social justice. He went on to assert that the Church often fell short of this moral obligation. He said,

Now we must admit that all too often, the church has been lax at this point. All too often in the midst of social evil, too many Christians have somehow stood still only to mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. All too often, in the midst of racial injustice, too many Christians have remained silent behind the safe security of stain glass windows. But when the church is true to its nature. When

¹² King, *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, 13-17.

¹³ “Dr. King To Appear At Montreat Today,” *Asheville Citizen Times* (August 21, 1965); Lawrence Alvis, Jr, “*The Bounds of their Habitations*”: *The Southern Presbyterian Church, Racial Ideology And the Civil Rights Movement, 1946-1972*, (dissertation, Auburn University, 1985).

it is true to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and when it is relevant, it is always active in any period of social change, seeking to guide and direct, seeking to bring the eternal (inaudible) of the gospel to bear on the particular situation. This is the great challenge facing the church today. This is the great challenge facing every Christian in these days of racial tension.¹⁴

King's Montreat address was typical of his eloquent style and moral clarity. His voice expressed the weight of fatigue, but he spoke for over an hour, challenging the audience to intentionally engage in the fight for civil rights. King hoped that ministers from all over the South would step out from behind their pulpit and join him in the streets on a moral crusade for social justice. It was this strategy that placed King and Bell on opposite ends of the civil rights spectrum.

In the aftermath of King's speech, Bell received a letter from an Atlanta pastor upset about reports that King had stayed in Billy Graham's Montreat home. Bell refuted the reports stating that Graham would never, under any situation, invite King to be a houseguest. Bell believed that King was going further and further away from reality and closed his letter to the Atlanta pastor by stating that he was utterly opposed to both King as a person and the methods and cause for which he stood.¹⁵

Glimpses into Bell's racial psyche during the early years of the 1960s show little change in his racial beliefs. He consistently held firm to his views on segregation and intermarriage. In a letter written to R.B. Crawford in August of 1961, Bell referenced what he found to be a dilemma not just in the South but throughout America. He

¹⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. "The Church on the Frontier of Racial Tension," speech delivered in Montreat, NC, August 21, 1965, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kF5VVPzcM9s>.

¹⁵ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to R.D. Littleton letter, September 11, 1965, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318, Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College (IL).

believed that the nation was paying for the failures of America's white ancestry, who recklessly sinned by "intermingling" with African Americans.¹⁶ The Crawford letter showed Bell's continual fear over the consequences posed by interracial marriage. The same views he held in the mid-1940s translated to the early 1960s with no noticeable change.

In the letter to R.B. Crawford, Bell also called out the rising tide of African Americans who he believed were causing the most extensive problems. He indicated that the African Americans instigating the most agitation had some amount of white blood flowing through their veins and pointed directly to the past "intermingling" of races as the problem.¹⁷ That same month Bell wrote a letter to John Wilder, which expressed Bell's growing fear for white residents in some areas of the South and even in Washington, D.C., where the population of African Americans continued to grow in relation to whites.¹⁸ Bell stated that seventy-three percent of the school-age children in Washington D.C. were black and denounced Northerners that exploited African Americans for their vote while simultaneously rejecting them socially. He believed that white Southerners treated African Americans better than white Northerners. This belief stemmed from Bell's paternalistic views as well as his pride in his native South. He argued that white Southerners treated African Americans with sympathy and

¹⁶ In the letter, Bell is vague as to what type of intermingling he was referring to. It is unclear if Bell meant interracial relationships only or if he was also referring to sexual violence and all forms of nonconsensual sex imposed upon black women during slavery and in subsequent years.

¹⁷ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to R.B. Crawford, August 30, 1961, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318, Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archives, Wheaton College, (IL). Bell's vagueness in this letter leads to much conjecture. It is unclear if Bell believed in the biological advantages of white blood in this letter, but it is possible that he is making that argument to Crawford.

¹⁸ Bell does not stipulate what type of fear he has for whites who live in areas with a larger African American population. When Bell discusses "fears" he typically does not offer specifics on what his "fears" might be.

understanding in a way that white Northerners did not. The Crawford and Wilder letters, both written in August of 1961, unveil Bell's concerns, not just about his continued fear over interracial marriage, but also the potential rise of a dominant black voting bloc.¹⁹

Bell's status on the national stage continued to grow thanks in large part to his immensely successful column in *Christianity Today*, entitled "A Layman and His Faith." Every two weeks, Bell used his column to expound upon a wide range of issues. He garnered an audience through *Christianity Today* that he never dreamed possible with *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*. Although still contributing editorials to the *Journal*, it was his writing for *Christianity Today* that garnered the most attention. The role of *Christianity Today* in the history of post-World War II American evangelicalism cannot be overstated, and Bell played a significant part in creating the conservative evangelical juggernaut. From Bell's perspective, a publication like *Christianity Today* was critical to combat the continued threat posed by *The Christian Century*.

By the 1950s, *The Christian Century* was the leading Christian progressive and ecumenically driven publication in the United States. It was founded in 1884 as the *Christian Oracle* and adopted its new name around the turn of the twentieth century. Contributors to the progressive publication in the early decades of the century included the likes of Jane Adams and Reinhold Niebuhr. In 1963, the magazine was the first to publish in full Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "A Letter From a Birmingham Jail."²⁰

¹⁹ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to John Wilder, August 21, 1961, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archives, Wheaton College (IL). Thomas Sugrue gave some weight to a portion of Bell's frustration with Northerners over race. Bell saw the white Northerners as hypocritical and using integrationist language to secure political gain. Sugrue stated that "many northern whites supported interactionism in rhetoric but rejected it in principle." Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), xxv. Bell shared a similar critique.

²⁰ "About Us," *The Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/about>

The *Christian Century* became a dynamo of Christian journalism beginning in 1908 when the Chicago clergyman Charles Clayton Morrison took the reins and led the fight for Protestant liberal theology, social action, and progressive politics. The magazine labeled the conservative wing of American Protestantism as “fundamentalist” and proclaimed that this form of religion was outdated. Leading church historian Martin Marty stated that the editors of the *Christian Century*, “saw fundamentalism as backwoods, over the hill, jerkwater phenomenon that had already outlived its time.”²¹

By the 1950s, Graham believed that the *Christian Century* had been influential in causing great harm to evangelical Christianity. The leaders of the publication argued that the Bible was subject to higher criticism and, therefore, multiple interpretations. They were proponents of modernism and believed that the twentieth century would see a progression of Christianity designed to spread unparalleled progress, peace, and social action. Graham stated that “*The Christian Century* guided the thinking of a large number of American clergy and, in turn, their church members.” Graham believed that the Great Depression, World War II, and the onset of the Cold War caused a general disillusionment among liberal Protestants. He claimed that liberals promised a peaceful and hopeful future but that many liberals in the early 1950s saw a different reality. According to Graham, “many clergy were desperate for tenable alternatives. However, ‘fightin’ fundamentalism’ was not what they were looking for.”²² It was in this religious environment between the liberals on one side and the fundamentalist on the other that produced the groundswell for *Christianity Today*.

²¹ Graham, *Just As I Am*, 335.

²² *Ibid.*, 336.

The origins of *Christianity Today* began one early morning in 1953, as a restless Billy Graham was thinking about ways to reach a broader audience with his message. After several hours of contemplation, Graham came up with an idea to begin a conservative Christian magazine that countered the *Christian Century*.²³ Unbeknownst to Graham, L. Nelson Bell was pondering a similar initiative. Bell desired to create a magazine that would spread a conservative theological, social, and political perspective across the country and help direct the new rising tide of religion in America.²⁴ *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* had a limited range of influence, and both Graham and Bell believed that a nondenominational, theologically conservative magazine could rival the progressive nature of the *Christian Century*.

While celebrating Christmas in Montreat in 1954, Bell and Graham discovered their shared desire to start a new national magazine that promoted Christian conservatism. Graham stated, "I feel there is needed in Protestantism today a magazine that is the counterpart of the *Christian Century*. Something that will be evangelical, theologically oriented, and will commend itself to the Protestant ministers of America. I feel it is desperately needed."²⁵

One of the first places Graham and Bell turned for both guidance and financial backing was Philadelphia philanthropist, Howard Pew. In March of 1955, Graham and Bell boarded a North Carolina train en route to Philadelphia. They arrived at Pew's Walnut Street office, where Pew gave a sizeable contribution. It was the first of many philanthropic gifts to *Christianity Today* and began a long relationship with both Graham

²³ Graham, *Just As I Am*, 337.

²⁴ Pollock, *A Foreign Devil In China*, 306.

²⁵ Graham, *Just As I Am*, 336.

and Bell that lasted until Pew died in 1972.²⁶ Pew's involvement with *Christianity Today* was just a small part of his engagement with American conservatism. He was a financial contributor to William Buckley's publication, *National Review*, as well as to the 1964 presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater. Pew and Bell shared similar concerns over the Church's role in political and social affairs and became allies in the fight against liberal theology and politics.²⁷

Bell quickly prepared to take over the operations for *Christianity Today*. Graham said, "When Dr. Bell gets his teeth into something, he never gives up. I get sidetracked. I get interested in other projects. But not Dr. Bell. He just sank his teeth into this, and he wouldn't let me off. He made me stick to it. He made Mr. Pew stick to it." Bell closed his highly profitable and successful medical practice to focus on developing the new magazine. His health also led in part to his decision to retire from the medical world. Bell had already suffered one heart attack by 1955, and in November, he had a second one. Bell officially left the medical world behind and focused his professional attention on his editorship of *Christianity Today*.²⁸ The magazine set up offices in Washington, D.C. In a letter Bell sent to President Eisenhower in October of 1956, he

²⁶ Pollock, *A Foreign Devil in China*, 307.

²⁷ David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*, 139-140. Historian, Darren Dochuk argued that Pew's engagement with evangelical institutions like *Christianity Today* was designed to offset the charity work performed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Pew believed that Rockefeller's brand of liberal Protestantism was a danger not only to conservative Christianity but also to American principles. In an article Dochuk wrote for Politico magazine he argued that "in Pew's mind, it was the Rockefellers' brand of ecumenical, interdenominational and internationalist ('monopolistic') Protestantism, and its prioritizing of science and structural reform over personal matters of the soul that was responsible for the nation's secular slide." Darren Dochuk, "The Other Brother Duo That Brought us the Modern GOP: Before the Kochs, there were the Pews," *Politico Magazine*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/09/02/pew-brothers-politics-influence-wealth-227993>. The author of this study also referenced Darren Dochuk, *Anointed With Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

²⁸ Pollock, *A Foreign Devil in China*, 308.

told the president that he could look down upon the White House lawn from the *Christianity Today* offices.²⁹

On October 15, 1956, the first edition of *Christianity Today*, rolled off the presses. The inaugural edition included an article by Billy Graham entitled, “Biblical Authority in Evangelism,” as well as an article on how Graham and Karl Barth were rescuing the Bible from liberalism. Bell penned his first of many editorials in the inaugural edition. It resonated with the first editorial he wrote for *The Southern Presbyterian Journal*, thirteen years earlier describing the “desire to express historical Christianity to the present generation.” Bell argued that “theological liberalism had failed to meet the moral and spiritual needs of the people” and that *Christianity Today* offered a solution to the “theological confusion existing in the world.”³⁰

During the Civil Rights era, the *Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* engaged in a battle for the hearts and minds of American Protestants. Thanks in large part to Pew’s financial backing and Graham’s celebrity status, *Christianity Today* carved out a significantly larger readership base. The two publications differed significantly in their coverage of civil rights and specifically their coverage of King. The *Christian Century* frequently covered King’s activity. He served as an editor at large in 1958 and, by the early 1960s, was a contributing editor.³¹ In vivid contrast, *Christianity Today*, barely mentioned King within its pages. In January 1964, the editors used two lines to

²⁹ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Dwight Eisenhower, October 25, 1956, Box 1, Folder 28, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton College, (IL).

³⁰ “Why ‘Christianity Today’?,” *Christianity Today* 1, No. 1 (October 15, 1956) 20-23.

³¹ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 176.

reference King's *Time* magazine's "Man of the Year" selection. Later that same year, they used one line to note his Nobel Prize.³²

Christianity Today took strong conservative political and social stands during Bell's relationship with the publication. It promoted an intense anti-communism, supported apartheid in South Africa, and ran articles in favor of capital punishment. Segregationist politics shaped the early years of *Christianity Today's* racial outlook, and during the 1960s, the magazine added the defense of "law and order" to its repertoire.³³ In 1963, after following the efforts of Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Birmingham, Alabama, Bell authored his first editorial on "law and order."

In April and May of 1963, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized protests in Birmingham to challenge the civic practices of what Martin Luther, Jr., called, "the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States."³⁴ King's declaration came from his renowned "Letter From Birmingham Jail," which also castigated the city's white religious leaders and their moderate stance on racial issues. King wrote, "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klan, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for

³² Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 170.

³³ G. Aiken Taylor, "Why Communism is Godless," *Christianity Today*, vol. 3, no. 6 (December 22, 1958): 13. "South African Relations," *Christianity Today*, vol. 2, no. 23, September 1, 1958: 30-31. Jacob J. Velenga, "Is Capital Punishment Wrong?," *Christianity Today*, vol. 4, no.1 (October 12, 1959): 7.

³⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter From Birmingham Jail* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2018), 3.

another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.'"³⁵

The situation in Birmingham turned violent on May 3. King helped orchestrate a protest march of school-age children, which began from the city's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The city's police chief, Eugene "Bull" Connor vowed to "fill the jails" of demonstrators and did just that. The children and teenagers who led the march were arrested and packed into Birmingham jail cells. The problem for Connor was that young people continued to flow out of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. With the jail full beyond capacity, Connor attempted new methods to curtail the ever-growing number of protesters. He ordered the city fire department to unleash their fire hoses and sent the city's K-9 division into the streets. As video cameras rolled, the demonstrators caught the brunt of the high-powered water hoses, and the police dogs viciously attacked those in their path.³⁶

In April, northern news outlets showed limited interest in the protests and even criticized their effectiveness. *Time* described them as "poorly timed." A *Washington Post* editorial described King's Birmingham plan as one of "doubtful utility." Even many of Birmingham's African American population felt that King's efforts in April inflamed tensions at a time when the city was making incremental progress in the area of race

³⁵ King, Jr., *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, 13.

³⁶ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul of America: The Southern Christian leadership Conference & Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 111-139. Fairclough detailed the SCLC's efforts to bring about desegregation in the city. The demonstrations continued in the days after May 3. There were bombings on May 11 which sparked some black riots but King was able to stabilize the situation. The demonstrations and negotiations eventually led to an agreement albeit one that did not give the SCLC all it wanted. Birmingham stores agreed to desegregate but parks, schools, theaters and hotels remained segregated. The author of this study also referenced Glen T. Eskew, *But For Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

relations.³⁷ However, after the violent assaults on young Birmingham protestors, the nation's television viewers had an opportunity to witness the effects of police brutality firsthand. Despite King's efforts, the protests in Birmingham were not entirely nonviolent. There were instances where rock-throwers targeted police, but the national narrative centered on the inescapable fact that Bull Connor unleashed water hoses and dogs on Birmingham's African American youth. Those attacks hovered over the American social consciousness and generated the kind of sympathy and social capital that helped usher in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.³⁸

Bell's defense of law and order amidst the chaos of civil unrest became a defining argument in his response to racial turmoil. In his editorial from July of 1963, entitled "Christian Race Relations," Bell opened with a familiar call to action, asking Christians to be leaders in the cause of solving racial disharmony. He believed that Christians could offer the kind of love and understanding that could transform the world and heal the nation's racial problems. Bell was concerned that the current state of race relations had become "so electric with emotional reaction that the voices of moderation on both sides of the issue are being drowned out by the louder voices of 'rights' without

³⁷ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1988) 737. The African American community was not a homogenous group in full support of King's methods. There were factions of African American business leaders not just in Birmingham but nationally who disagreed with King's belief in civil disobedience. African American religious leaders were also not unified behind King. One of King's most ardent detractors within the African American Church was Joseph Jackson, a Chicago minister that sought to boycott King's efforts at every turn. Wallace Best, "The Right Achieved and the Wrong Way Conquered: J.H. Jackson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Conflict over Civil Rights," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal Interpretation*, vol. 16, no. 2 (Summer 2006), 195-226.

³⁸ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 111-139. Fairclough noted the debate over whether the SCLC led demonstrations in Birmingham had a direct correlation with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He referenced the political scientist, David Garrow, who minimized the impact of Birmingham on civil rights legislation (133). In contrast, Fairclough argued that the events in Birmingham prompted both John F. Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy to move forward with the introduction of civil rights legislation (134). Fairclough quotes a speech given by JFK on June 11, 1963 in which Kennedy stated, "the events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them (134).

reference to the realities of the situation or the only way whereby they can be solved.” Bell viewed unrest through the form of civil disobedience as a direct assault on law and order and, consequently, an attack on Christian moral standards. At least within the confines of the Civil Rights Movement, Bell equated the support for “law and order” as inherently Christian while viewing acts of civil disobedience as immoral. During the 1960s, Bell did not make a distinction between those who protested peacefully and those who chose more violent tactics. In Bell’s mind, the natural progression of civil disobedience was violence.³⁹

Bell continued his 1963 editorial by restating his message from the *Life* roundtable discussion held almost seven years earlier. He included his entire eight-point written statement and argued that the principles found within were “still generally valid.” Bell saw a social landscape that was out of control and blamed many religious leaders for accentuating the disruption. He wrote that “many church leaders have themselves become confused and now defend, even participate in, civil rioting.” The disrespect to both the police and the rules of law frustrated Bell. He continued, “We are convinced that public places should be desegregated, thereby removing humiliation of and discrimination against a segment of our population. But we seriously question mob demonstrations as the right method to accomplish this end. Other people also have ‘civil rights.’” From Bell’s perspective, the “mob” and the peaceful protestors shared equal footing. Both groups threatened the conservatism that defined his faith and political makeup. A corporate gathering of people protesting for large, structural change impeded on the individual, and therefore Bell viewed that as immoral. Bell’s focus was

³⁹ L. Nelson Bell, “Christian Race Relations,” *Christianity Today* vol. 7, no. 21 (July 19, 1963): 23.

not on the neglected rights of the larger group but instead on the rights of the individual in which that group infringed.⁴⁰

As Bell relayed in the 1963 editorial, his chief concern was for the young people of the nation. He wrote, “many white boys and girls, often encouraged by their parents, have participated in counter-demonstrations involving insults and violence. At the same time, many Negro young people are being led into a psychological blind alley – the philosophy that ‘rights’ can and should be secured by mob action. All of this is having a traumatic effect on a generation already showing little respect for law.” Bell pleaded for peace and an end to racial tension, but his reliance on friendly courtesies and kind gestures did not speak to the broader problems of race that spurred the Civil Rights Movement.⁴¹

Bell concluded his “Christian Race Relations” editorial by writing: “We must take care lest under the guise of ‘civil rights’ for one race... a form of legalized tyranny is imposed on our country by a minority. Where civil rioting is used to get rid of unjust laws, the end can be oppression.” Bell’s conservative politics frequently fused with his religious sentiments. Bell praised the police officers who managed restraint in the face of tension, but praise for the peaceful protestors was noticeably absent. In these final words, Bell also made clear that demonstrations that challenged authority through the

⁴⁰ Bell, “Christian Race Relations,” *Christianity Today*, (July 19, 1963): 23. As was customary for Bell, he did not offer insights into what specific individuals or what specific rights might be infringed upon. Bell frequently argued in the abstract without drilling down into specifics.

⁴¹ Ibid.

form of civil disobedience were problematic whether the disputed laws were just or unjust.⁴²

Although Bell received frequent praise for his writings on race, there were multiple detractors. In a letter written to Bell on August 7, 1963, the pastor of the Woodlawn Mennonite Church of Chicago, Delton Franz, offered a blistering critique of Bell's "Christian Race Relations" article. He questioned whether Bell understood the motivation of demonstrators or the amount of self-discipline and self-restraint of those who made up the overwhelming contingent of protesters. He called Bell out for using the terms "civil rioting" and "mob action" about those who painstakingly worked for nonviolence. Franz went on to write that the facts clearly showed that the "mob" nature of the demonstrations came primarily from police brutality and from white agitators. Franz described the police action in Birmingham as "beastly." He then accused members of the white Church of turning "deaf ears and blind eyes" toward the African Americans in the one hundred years since the Emancipation Proclamation. He lambasted white religious leaders blaming their racism and lack of interest in justice for the current racial issues. Toward the end of Franz's letter, he pointed to a flaw in what he saw was the core of Bell's theological system. Franz wrote that "The paternalism of our pious 'soul winning' can never be used to illustrate our involvement. I believe that behooves all of us 'white' Christians to truly identify in the suffering and struggle of our colored brothers, rather than to stand on the sideline passing judgment... that may well

⁴² Bell, "Christian Race Relations," *Christianity Today*, (July 19, 1963): 23.

be akin to the sin of Saul of Tarsus who stood passively by holding the coats of those who threw the stones!”⁴³

Bell responded to Franz in a letter dated August 12. He noted that Franz’s critique was one of the few negative responses he had received and that at least three of the many positive reactions were from African Americans who supported his views. He suggested that recent demonstrations held in Philadelphia and New York proved that the North had racial problems of their own. Throughout his writing career, Bell frequently tried to highlight Northern hypocrisy and blame instigators from the North for much of the South’s racial unrest. Bell also stated that the demonstrations only had two possible outcomes: capitulation without an authentic consideration of either side or enforcement of law and order, which inevitably led to violence. Bell then reiterated a familiar theme when he told Franz that social rights must be earned and not legislated and called the threat to that concept as potentially the greatest danger to the future of American society.⁴⁴

In June of 1965, Bell responded to a reader of *Christianity Today*, who challenged the publication about an editorial written in 1964 concerning bombings in Birmingham. It is unclear if the author of the letter referred explicitly to the bombing at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church or if he had another bombing on his mind. Regardless, the author blamed either African Americans or white Communists for the attacks and suggested that Martin Luther King should take a lie detector test to offer up

⁴³ Letter from Delton Franz to L. Nelson Bell, August 7, 1963, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton (IL). Franz’s reference to Saul comes from the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:54-60.

⁴⁴ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Delton, August 12, 1963, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton (IL).

whatever knowledge he might have about the situation. In Bell's response, he specifically mentioned the bombing at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. He indicated that he was in Birmingham in early 1965 and that while getting a haircut, the barber told him with certainty who perpetuated the bombing but that the evidence was not enough to arrest anyone.⁴⁵

In August of 1963, Martin Luther King and civil rights leaders and supporters from all over the country brought the cause of equality to the nation's front door. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom brought 250,000 people to the Lincoln Memorial. The words from King's speech, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty we are free at last," reverberated through a crowd demanding change. The demonstrations in Birmingham were chiefly about segregation, but in Washington on that summer afternoon, the spirit of desegregation joined forces with the demand for better jobs.⁴⁶ The weight of the Civil Rights Movement continued to press on Washington lawmakers, eventually culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Act made discrimination based on race, religion, or national origin illegal in the public sphere. Segregation in hotels, restaurants, movie theaters and parks came to a legal end. The Act also addressed discrimination in the American workplace as well. In a statement concerning

⁴⁵ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to H. Cecil Miller, June 15, 1965, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archives, Wheaton College, (IL). Local KKK members designed the bomb to go off during the Sunday School hour at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in September of 1963 and, as a result, killed four young school-age girls. No one was brought to trial for the bombing until 1977.

⁴⁶ Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 131-132. The March on Washington brought a quarter of a million people to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. As Branch noted, "Beyond the record breaking numbers... and the stunning good order that turned all the riot troops and plasma reserves into stockpiles of paranoia, the march made history with dignified spirits. News outlets gushed over senses of harmony." The event was significant because for many Americans it was the first time that they had seen a complete speech by Martin Luther King, and it introduced King's "everyday pulpit rhetoric as a national hymn." Bell did not reference the March on Washington in any letters or editorials that I could find.

the Civil Rights Act, Martin Luther King stated that the new legislation would “bring practical relief to the Negro in the South, and will give the Negro in the North the psychological boost that he sorely needs.”⁴⁷

On February 11, 1964, the day after the House passed the Civil Rights Act and sent the legislation to the senate, L. Nelson Bell wrote a letter to Dr. Clyde Taylor that detailed his concern about the proposed Act. He was fearful that the Civil Rights Act might produce a scenario where the nation’s black minority might tyrannize the white majority.⁴⁸ He had a unique critique of what became known as the Title VII Equal Employment Opportunity Act. Bell believed that the Act placed an unusually heavy burden upon white employers who decided to hire a white employee over a black one. He was fearful that even if a white employee were more qualified for a job, white employers would lose control over their hiring practices due to the threat of being sued on the grounds of discrimination. Bell saw in the Civil Rights Act a threat to individual freedom and the ability to run businesses as owners saw fit. He believed that the Act did nothing to end racial discrimination.⁴⁹

In a letter Bell wrote to Dr. Norton Mason later that month, Bell shifted gears and expressed his continued frustration with those who used civil disobedience. He referenced an incident in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in which roughly thirty-five Northern ministers took part in civil rights protests. Bell recalled that these men made a general nuisance of themselves but that the police did not step in to disrupt their activities. On

⁴⁷ Cited in “Civil Rights Act of 1964,” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/civil-rights-act-1964>.

⁴⁸ Bell does not give specifics on how this black minority might tyrannize a white majority.

⁴⁹ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Clyde Taylor, February 11, 1964, Box 51, Folder 42, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton (IL).

their fifth day of protest, Bell noted that the ministers deliberately broke the law by blocking the steps to the courthouse and were subsequently arrested. Bell sarcastically referred to them as “martyrs.” He also pointed out that the men already had associates ready to bail them out. In Bell’s mind, this was the extent to which the Civil Rights Movement would go to garner attention.⁵⁰

Bell continued his letter to Dr. Mason by stating a familiar theme. He blamed white America for the years of humiliation and discrimination imposed upon African Americans and the deep resentment which that caused. Bell placed significant blame on the current state of race relations on the generations of white abuse but offered a caveat before closing the letter. He believed that the nonviolent protests encouraged by civil rights leaders were not the solution to the nation’s racial problems. He stated that the practices of civil disobedience were causing resentment by whites towards blacks that would take years to overcome.⁵¹

In between the time the Civil Rights Act passed the House and the time Lyndon Johnson signed it into law on July 2, 1964, Bell’s frustration over the demonstrations conducted by the Civil Rights Movement spilled out into an editorial he wrote for *The Presbyterian Journal*. Entitled, “Street Demonstration – Playing With Fire,” Bell stated that no one hoped for racial justice and harmony more than he and the rest of the staff at the *Journal*. He then questioned how some civil rights advocates had promoted their

⁵⁰ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Dr. H. Norton Mason, February 24, 1964, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton (IL). William Stuckey wrote the definitive book on race relations in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. William Stuckey, *Hattiesburg: An American City in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2019).

⁵¹ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Dr. H. Norton Mason, February 24, 1964, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton (IL). Bell does not provide any specific solution to the nation’s racial problems in the letter to Mason.

cause and, like his critique of the Civil Rights Act, expressed concerns of tyranny by the minority. Bell focused most of his article on the dangers of civil disobedience. He wrote, “there is a serious question about the wisdom of such demonstrations, for the right solution of race problems can never be achieved that way.” He continued, “there is no merit in courting arrest for the testimony of having been in jail.” Bell proceeded to mention the situation with the Northern ministers in Hattiesburg.⁵²

Bell then shifted his editorial towards the moral concept of “law and order.” He wrote, “We are concerned about continued demonstrations because they are adding to the spirit of lawlessness abroad in the world. One can hardly take up a newspaper without reading of street demonstrations, mob violence, destruction of property and occasionally loss of life.” Bell subsequently moved into a deeper issue. He wrote, “We are convinced that behind some of these activities there are individuals whose primary interest is not civil rights but national disorder. The Church and her ministers, both Negro and white, should carefully shun a method of procedure which can lead, not to civil rights, but to anarchy and chaos.”⁵³

Bell closed his editorial by stating that the “message” the protestors were spreading was pushing too far and that the result would lead to disaster. He went on to warn: “the church will find she has lost her position as spiritual leader. We simply cannot imagine either our Lord or the Apostle Paul abdicating their responsibilities to the hearts of men and becoming a part of a movement out of which looms bloodshed and national disorder.” Bell consistently argued that the Church would lose its moral

⁵² L. Nelson Bell, “Street Demonstrations – Playing With Fire,” *The Presbyterian Journal* vol. 22, no. 50 (April 8, 1964): 11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

standing in the community if it strayed by engaging itself in the political and social unrest of the time. Contemporaries of Bell, like Samuel Hill and Ernest Trice Thompson, believed the very opposite. They thought that by not engaging in the unrest of the day, the church was sticking its head in the sand and, in fact, losing the moral authority that it once held. Those two conflicting beliefs defined the tumultuous and divided nature of Southern Christianity during the 1960s.⁵⁴

In June of 1964, Bell seemed to come to grips with the reality that the American status quo was changing. In a letter he penned to a Presbyterian minister from Alabama, Bell stated his belief that the racial pendulum had swung entirely too far in the opposite direction. He concluded that based on the current environment, a return to the way things were before the unrest of the 1960s was impossible. Bell was conscious enough to know that things were changing. As the Civil Rights Act made its way through Congress and the demonstrations continued in the street, Bell understood clearly that a different America was on the horizon.⁵⁵

In March of 1965, Selma, Alabama, became the center of King's civil rights initiative. Selma had a population that was fifty percent black, but only two percent of registered voters were black. Poll taxes, literary tests, and a wealth of racist election officials led to white dominance at the ballot box and the jury pool. In a peaceful protest on February 18, Jimmy Lee Jackson was beaten and shot to death by an Alabama State Trooper. Following Jackson's death, King and other organizers of the SCLC,

⁵⁴ Bell, "Street Demonstrations – Playing With Fire," *The Presbyterian Journal* (April 8, 1964): 11.

⁵⁵ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to John H. Knight, June 6, 1964, Box 32, Folder 4, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton College, (IL).

initiated a fifty-mile march from Selma to the capital of Alabama, Montgomery, to protest the voting restrictions placed on the state's African Americans.⁵⁶

The first attempt began on Sunday, March 7. John Lewis, a leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, stood in front of nearly 600 people. After crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge just outside Selma, the marchers ran into Sheriff Jim Clark and a host of state and local lawmen. What ensued became known as "Bloody Sunday." The officers shot tear gas at the marchers and savagely beat many of them with batons and whips as the protesters retreated. News cameras caught the bloody assault and broadcasted the event nationwide. The response was immediate. An onslaught of supporters, both black and white, made their way to Selma in support of voting rights. On March 21, after receiving legal clearance, the marchers finally made their way from Selma, across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and onto the steps of the Alabama capital. The death of Jimmy Lee Jackson, along with the vigilante murders of two white activists during the Selma ordeal, James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, helped pave the way for the Voting Rights Act, which Lyndon Johnson signed into law in August of 1965. The new law made poll taxes and literacy tests illegal and gave African Americans across the country unprecedented voting power. In the next election, Selma residents officially voted Sheriff Jim Clark out of office.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 8-193. David J. Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978). James Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 579-587. "Jimmy Lee Jackson: The Murder that Sparked the Selma to Montgomery Marches of 1965," The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, <https://www.freedomcenter.org/voice/death-sparked-selma-montgomery-marches-1965>.

⁵⁷ Mary Stanton, *From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1998). Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 8-193. Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 579-587. Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965*.

The day before “Bloody Sunday,” Bell wrote a letter about the events in Selma to a *Christianity Today* supporter, T.H. Mitchell. With all the unrest, Bell hoped that the advocates of civil rights would slow down their efforts in the Deep South. He told Mitchell that the speed in which the advocates were moving was building up significant hatred that would lead to violence. Unfortunately, Bell’s fear came true on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Bell was concerned not only about the isolated incidents of violence, but more so about the possibilities of a full-blown race war. He pointed to what he saw as the tremendous progress that African Americans had achieved but insisted that African Americans must learn that there were certain things that they could not simply demand.⁵⁸

In the March 26, 1965 edition of *Christianity Today*, an editorial written by Arthur Matthews and entitled “Religion and Race: The Clergy March on Alabama” highlighted the experiences of the hundreds of clergy that descended upon Selma after “Bloody Sunday.” The editorial ran with a picture of James Reeb and discussed the minister’s life and death. Matthews was highly critical of Alabama’s governor George Wallace. The Alabama minister, John Knight, wrote Bell to share his displeasure with Matthews’ article. Knight described the events in Alabama as a “Negro circus” and criticized clergy for entangling themselves in such a disgraceful march. He also had the highest praise for Governor Wallace and lambasted King’s agitation and antics. Knight ended his letter to Bell by stating that it took the South a hundred years to get over the Civil War and

⁵⁸ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to T.H. Mitchell, March 6, 1965, Box 37, Folder 5, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton College, (IL). Bell continued with more abstract thoughts offering no insights into what progress African Americans had achieved nor what things they could not demand.

that it will take another hundred years to overcome the animosity that King and others were creating.⁵⁹

Bell responded to Knight by stating that he was displeased with Matthews' editorial and that he voiced his displeasure to the editorial staff and lead editor, Carl F. H. Henry. Bell attempted to place some of the responsibility for the events in Selma on law enforcement and state authorities who let the situation get out of hand. He also told Knight that he knew that the marchers deliberately provoked law officers and that the phrase "nonviolent" was very misleading. Like his response to events in Birmingham in 1963, Bell placed a large portion of the blame for the violence in Selma at the feet of protestors.⁶⁰

In April, *Christianity Today* received a letter from a Selma minister named Russell Jensen, who directly blamed the murders of Jimmy Lee Jackson, James Reeb, and Viola Liuzzo on the constant prodding, slurs, and disruptions of the protestors in Selma. Jensen described Martin Luther King as an ardent racist and categorized him with the vilest names. Jensen closed by sharing his fear that King's success in Selma would lead to a significant change in political leadership. In his mind, Jensen feared that unintelligent black voters could threaten Alabama's political status quo.⁶¹

Bell responded to Jensen with a brief note but expressed his sympathies for the situation in Selma and what he saw was the unfortunate condition of Alabamians. Bell

⁵⁹ Arthur H. Matthews, "Religion and Race: The Clergy March on Alabama," *Christianity Today* vol. 9, no. 13 (March 26, 1965): 40-41. Letter from John H. Knight to L. Nelson Bell, March 26, 1965, Box 32, Folder 4, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton College, (IL).

⁶⁰ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to John H. Knight, March 31, 1965, Box 32, Folder 4, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton College, (IL).

⁶¹ Letter from Russel V. Jensen to Carl Henry, April 6, 1965, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton College (IL).

did not respond to Jensen's critique of King. He left King's name out of his reply but did, however, call the events in Selma a Northern invasion designed to fan the fires of hate. Bell's relentless consistency echoed in this letter to Jensen. Like many of his statements on race in the 1940s and 1950s, Bell blamed the heightened race tensions in the South on Northern liberal extremists. Bell's letter to Jensen also highlights his careful approach to letter writing. He was extremely conscious of the language he used. Bell typically refrained from using inflammatory words or name-calling. Despite receiving letters that denigrated King, Bell routinely ignored the comments or responded in a less hateful tone. However, Bell also refrained from correcting those who used more vitriolic language when describing King and the Civil Rights Movement.⁶²

In May of 1965, Bell again weighed in on the situation in Selma. In a letter to Selma resident Charles Putzel, Bell expressed his belief in a distorted representation of the events that engulfed the city and suggested that a more accurate and truthful picture existed. He described his contempt for the scorn that had unfairly characterized the city. Bell again primarily blamed the recent problems in Selma on those in the North who he claimed had no understanding of the reality of the situation in Southern cities.⁶³

In June, Bell expressed his frustration with Governor Wallace and the inadvertent role he played in the progressive evolution of voting rights. In a letter to H.C. Miller, Bell described how Wallace's intransigence produced a new voting reality in the form of what Bell saw as an unjust voting rights bill. From Bell's perspective, Wallace simply

⁶² Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Russel V. Jensen, April 19, 1965, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archive, Wheaton College (IL).

⁶³ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to Charles L. Putzel, May 1, 1965, Box 43, Folder 12, CN 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archives, Wheaton College, (IL).

needed to allow voting privileges to what Bell believed were a relatively few qualified African Americans. Bell assumed that if Wallace had done so the demand for expansive voting rights would never have come to pass. Bell closed the letter by blaming the voting fiasco solely on Wallace's stubbornness. Bell was concerned that every African American, regardless of social status or background, would flood the polls. He described some of these potential black voters as "riff-raff." Bell's choice of words showed his deep concern over the rise of the black vote. He had grave misgivings about the prospects of black political power. This fear spoke to Bell's trepidation of minority rule and the possibilities of some level of tyranny upon the majority. Bell did not mention any concerns over white voters of lower social standing.⁶⁴

On August 6, with Martin Luther King looking over the shoulder of Lyndon Johnson, the president signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The events in Selma once again provided the social capital needed to make legislative change. The new piece of Civil Rights legislation banned literacy tests and instituted federal oversight. There were immediate changes in voter registration numbers across the South. In Alabama, the number of African American registered voters jumped exponentially, but the white electorate still dominated the state. In 1964 there were 92,737 African American voters, which represented nine percent of the total African American population in the state. That same year, 935,695 white Alabama voters comprised ninety-one percent of the white population. In 1966, the African American voter roll jumped to 246,396, which

⁶⁴ Letter from L. Nelson Bell to H.C. Miller, June 15, 1965, Box 43, Folder 12, Cn 318: Papers of L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham Archives, Wheaton College, (IL).

was seventeen percent of the black community. In the same year, the white voter block jumped to 1,192,072, which represented eighty-three percent of the white population.⁶⁵

In early April of 1968, Martin Luther King was in Memphis standing with striking sanitation workers. On the morning of April 4, he stepped outside his hotel, and an assassin's bullet killed him. Since his successes in Birmingham and later Selma, the road became more difficult for King. Racial riots in Los Angeles, Detroit, and Newark highlighted a more violent side of American social unrest. King ran into problems in Chicago while attempting to desegregate housing, and his unpopular stand in opposition to the Vietnam War complicated his relationship with American society. Even within the African American community, the rise of a militant black power movement challenged King's core belief in civil disobedience.⁶⁶

In the aftermath of King's death and the riots that followed, *Christianity Today* published several articles about King, his legacy, and the situation that dominated American streets during one of the most tumultuous months in the nation's history. Bell's column in the April 26 edition was simply entitled, "Civil Disobedience." He wrote that "calculated civil disobedience, seemingly so innocent, has brought in an era of lawlessness and bloodshed that can plunge our nation into unbelievable chaos. The tragic death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and subsequent events bear mute testimony to the uncontrolled forces now unloosed across the land." Bell expressed his frustration with the concept of civil disobedience because he believed that the teleological outcome

⁶⁵ Peyton McCrary, Jerome A. Gray, Edward Still, and Huey L. Perry, "Alabama," in *Quiet Revolution in the South: The Impact of the Voting Rights Act, 1965-1990*, ed. Chandler Davidson and Bernard Grofman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 38-66.

⁶⁶ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*.

of social demonstrations was rebellion and anarchy. From his perspective, Bell concluded that dictatorship, loss of freedom, and ultimate bondage was the eventual end of nonviolent protests.⁶⁷

Bell addressed the social and political turmoil that manifested itself on the streets of American cities. He wrote, “Riots, bloodshed, arson, loss of life and property – a dismal story – are the result of trying to redress wrongs in the streets rather than in the courts and at the ballot box. In rejecting ‘gradualism’ with its attending frustrations and disappointments, many are resorting to a senseless rebellion that adds tension and injustice.” Bell believed firmly in the idea that change must come only through legal channels and that any attempts to circumvent law and order was a moral insult to American society. Bell saw civil disobedience as an imposition on the individual rights of those affected by demonstrations and riots. He wrote, “to engage in or condone civil disobedience is to loose a tiger of destruction. The welfare of any nation depends on respect for and enforcement of law. Lawlessness is now prevalent enough to endanger the very life of our nation. Laws that are inadequate or unjust should be changed in the courts and at the polls; they cannot be changed in the streets.” Bell’s hopes for a gradual change to racial issues defined his outlook. He simply was not comfortable with an abrupt alteration of the societal norms.⁶⁸

Bell continued by summarizing his feelings on the current state of racial problems in America. He wrote, “no one can deny that we have countenanced discrimination and humiliation to such a point that a sense of frustration is inevitable; now this frustration

⁶⁷ L. Nelson Bell, “Civil Disobedience” *Christianity Today* vol. 12, no. 15 (April 26, 1968): 20-21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

has caused violent reactions. These sins against human beings must cease, and equal opportunities must be available to all. But with these needed changes (and tremendous progress is being made in this direction), respect for law and law enforcement must be maintained.” He also indicated that his words were not a desire to maintain the status quo, but instead, they were “a plea for recognition that the blindness and unconcern of the dominant segment of society must be completely changed. And on the other hand, it is an affirmation that any status and rights gained through civil disorder will be gained at too high a price.”⁶⁹

Bell continued his argument against civil disobedience. He wrote, “the lawlessness that has entered our national life through civil disobedience – a concept having the approval of most of the major denominations – can prove to be the moral cancer that will destroy our country.” Bell pleaded with governing Church bodies to reassess their views on civil disobedience. He wrote that “civil disobedience is not the ‘harmless gesture of protest’ it was once said to be. Rather, it has grown into a monster of disorder, riots, and general lawlessness that is eating at the vitals of our national life.” Bell wrote his editorial on civil disobedience amid widespread chaos around the country. He called to end injustice, discrimination, and humiliation but in a way that supported the law at all costs.⁷⁰

In Bell’s final years, his enthusiasm and energy kept him at the forefront of conservative evangelicalism. A split over theological issues forced Bell to resign from the board and to end his long relationship with *The Presbyterian Journal*. The

⁶⁹ Bell, “Civil Disobedience,” *Christianity Today*, (April 26, 1968).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

publication under different leadership set out to form a new denomination separate from the PCUS, and Bell could not follow.⁷¹ Bell continued till his death to serve on the editorial staff for *Christianity Today* as well as write his immensely popular column, “A Layman and His Faith.” In 1972, Bell became the moderator of the PCUS General Assembly, which was the highest position in the Southern Presbyterian Church.⁷²

The evening before Bell’s death, he stood at the podium in Anderson Auditorium in his beloved Montreat and gave a powerful invocation before the beginning of the World Missions Conference. Bell spoke at the same conference thirty-one years before upon his return from China. He pleaded with the attendees to turn their lives over to Christ and to seek salvation. Throughout Bell’s life, that message never changed. One of Bell’s defining characteristics was his consistency. Over the thirty-plus years of Bell’s writing career, there was little if any change in his theological, social, or political views. His sincere commitment to conservative evangelicalism as well as his never-wavering belief in individual choice and the dangers of interracial marriage shaped his social, political, and racial outlook. Bell was a man of deep faith, love, generosity, and selflessness, but that does not overshadow his inability to grasp the full dilemma of structural racial injustice and his subtle adherence to white supremacy. He scratched at the surface of those problems by understanding that white Americans routinely treated black Americans as second class citizens, but his belief in a gradual change of the status quo prevented him from rising above the white Southern, conservative heritage in which he lived. Bell’s deep-seated commitment to the purity of races truly limited his

⁷¹ Harold Lindsell, “L. Nelson Bell: In Memoriam,” *Christianity Today* 17, no. 23 (August, 31, 1973): 6.

⁷² Ibid.

ability to view black America on equal footing. His stance on issues like interracial marriage, as well as his commitment to conservative politics, placed a divide between Bell and black Americans that he was never able to cross.

Conclusion

In the summer of 1967, the cities of Detroit and Newark exploded with racial rioting. In response, President Lyndon Johnson tasked the governor of Illinois, Otto Kerner, to lead a group designed to determine the root causes of the unrest in the American inner city. Members of the Kerner Commission included representatives from the United States Congress, the mayor of New York City, the police chief of Atlanta, and the president of the NAACP. The Commission released its findings in 1968, coming to the simple conclusion that “our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.”⁷³

From 1942-1973, L. Nelson Bell created a narrative that supported two “separate and unequal” societies. He was a segregationist at heart but differentiated himself as a paternalist in contrast to the more vitriolic wing of white supremacy. Plagued by white supremacy during the entirety of Bell’s life, the American South broadly endorsed segregationist views and the racial status quo. The presidential election of 1968 expressed this white Southern position. Segregationist governor, George Wallace, ran as an independent and garnered 13.5% of the national popular vote. He won Alabama and Mississippi in landslides while also winning Georgia, Louisiana, and Arkansas. These numbers represent a white South reluctant to alter the region’s racial structure.

⁷³ Kerner Commission, “*Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,*” (New York, Bantam Books, March 1968), 1.

Although Bell sharply disagreed with Wallace's militant response to race relations, their views on segregation were foundationally similar.⁷⁴

Bell's unrelenting devotion to theological, social, and political conservatism characterized every aspect of his life and drove his views on segregation. During the 1940s, Bell's version of theological conservatism helped confirm his commitment to the belief in the God-ordained differences between the races. His interpretation of the Bible justified his conviction that interracial marriage was sinful. Bell aggressively fought to prevent African American young people from attending conferences at Montreat and expressed a palpable frustration with conference centers or other evangelical institutions that intentionally placed white and black teenagers together in social settings.

In the 1950s, Bell maintained his foundational belief in the immorality of interracial marriage, but he refrained from using the subject as a frequent talking point. After the *Brown v. Board* decision in 1954, Bell adopted an argument that championed social segregation. He accepted the legality of *Brown* but began to distinguish between the differences in what he called "forced" and "unforced" segregation. He believed that social interaction between white and black Americans was entirely appropriate if the relationships developed naturally, were not explicitly intended to force integration, and did not occur between impressionable young people. Bell also believed that white

⁷⁴ "Presidential Election of 1968," *Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections*, <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1968>; Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

individuals had the right to choose these natural social environments but did not offer that same autonomy to African Americans.

In the 1960s, Bell's writings had a more politically conservative tilt. He squared off against the Civil Rights Movement and particularly against the philosophy of civil disobedience. He believed that violence was at the core behind each act of civil disobedience, no matter what civil rights leaders might claim. From Bell's perspective, there was no differentiation between peaceful protestors and rioters. He praised law enforcement officials when they showed restraint, but he did not offer that same praise to those protestors who peacefully demonstrated on behalf of civil rights.

The 1960s also showed Bell's agitation with Martin Luther King, Jr. Bell's objections to King's visit to Montreal demonstrated not only Bell's tenacity but his specific disdain for King and the message of civil rights. Bell's staunch support for issues like segregation and African American voter suppression had detrimental effects in an area that was close to Bell's heart: the mission field. Despite being explicitly confronted with the notion that his stance on American civil rights negatively affected the work of American missionaries, Bell was unwilling to make any concessions toward authentic racial equality.

Bell's racial beliefs stemmed from a social and theological background that developed within the confines of Southern evangelicalism. During his life, Bell was able to justify racial prejudice through the lens of his religious faith. Evangelicalism allowed Bell to operate freely within a theological belief system that desired the end of individual discrimination against African Americans but also offered a framework that fostered the

systemic nature of white supremacy. Bell's racial outlook did not account for a white power structure geared to structurally oppress African Americans.

The racial views of L. Nelson Bell resonated with a significant number of twentieth-century Southern evangelicals who struggled to recognize the complete humanity and equality of African Americans. Bell believed in absolute equality from a spiritual perspective and reluctantly accepted legal equality, but his full acceptance of African Americans fell short in the realm of social equality. Few evangelicals have rivaled Bell's genuine commitment to his faith and his life of service. However, his inability to adapt his theological, social, and political conservatism to the growing racial tensions of the twentieth century leaves those in the present to wrestle with Bell's conflicted and flawed legacy.

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