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Alan Scot Willis. *All According to God's Plan: Southern Baptist Missions and Race, 1945-1970.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. xiii + 260 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2341-7.

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Reconciling All Men: The Race Problem and Progressive Baptist Missionaries

Southern Baptists have not fared well in the historical literature about race and religion. Historians for at least four decades have noted the extent to which Southern Baptists (who until relatively recently were virtually all white, as opposed to Baptists in the South who could be either white or black) supported their home region's racial status quo, whether it be slavery or segregation. In 1966, Samuel S. Hill Jr. argued that a "central theme" of an overriding emphasis on the conversion experience and the need to be born again marked southern Protestantism.[1] Hill's book, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, discussed more than just Baptists, but its conclusions applied particularly well to Southern Baptists, the region's largest denomination. The "practical fruits" of that central theme, Hill argued, included an absence of a Christian social ethic and no concern for social reform. Most Southern Baptists viewed the larger society through selective lenses, failing to apply the biblical commands to love God and one's neighbor to all aspects of their lives. In 1967, Rufus Spain argued that Southern Baptists were "at ease in Zion."[2] And five years later, John Lee Eighmy's book gave this phenomenon a title–"cultural captivity."[3]

It is significant that Hill appears as a primary source in Alan Scot Willis' new book, *All According to God's Plan: Southern Baptist Missions and Race, 1945-1970.* This is one indication of how far the scholarship on race and religion in the South has developed since Hill's spiritual and social lament in the mid-1960s. Hill, Spain, and Eighmy set a high standard for studying their native region and denomination. They asked questions similar to Willis's driving question, namely, "how do people's religious beliefs influence the way they think about race" (p. 2). For those earlier scholars, it was a mistake to divorce Baptists' beliefs from their attitudes about social problems. Religious faith was to be treated with the utmost seriousness, even if those scholars did examine their co-religionists and find their commitment to racial justice wanting. Neither a southerner nor a Baptist himself, Willis lives up to their standard and takes seriously what Southern Baptists' said and wrote about the region's race problem during the long civil rights era. Willis describes how the religious beliefs of one minority segment of the Southern Baptist Convention contributed to an alternative vision for the South's white Christians on the race question.

Willis's primary contribution here is his focus on a heretofore ignored group of denominational leaders–missionaries–and their attitudes toward racism and segregation back home. The thrust of his argument is that these Southern Baptist missionaries and mission leaders acted subversively, offering up a compelling alternative argument to the standard Southern Baptist defense of segregation. First, progressive missionaries argued that racism was biblically and morally wrong and undermined the Christian message. The Gospel was colorblind and salvation was available to all. In 1964, a resolution adopted at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention reminded Baptists that "all men stand as equals at the foot of the cross without distinction of color." That resolution also called on the denomination to "rededicate ourselves in the spirit of Christ to a ministry of reconciliation among all men" (quoted, p. 176). The means of that reconciliation were significant. Such a lofty goal could only be achieved through spiritual conversion. In Willis's telling, then, the "central theme" that Samuel Hill described some forty years ago was not necessarily limiting at all. It would be the instrument of reform.

More important for Willis's argument, these progressives appealed to their fellow Baptists' commitment to the Great Commission, Jesus' charge to his followers to go and make disciples of all nations. Progressive Baptists linked events in Africa and colonialism in general with segregation, and argued that racism and segregation would hurt Baptists' evangelical efforts. As early as 1955,

Nigerian Baptists reminded Southern Baptists that "Nigerians are acutely aware of the problems of race relations in America, they identify themselves with the American Negro, and they consider racism in any form unjust" (quoted, p. 80). And in the early 1960s, Tanganyika threatened to exclude any missionaries from churches that practiced segregation. Not only did racism contradict the Gospel message, it threatened the missionaries' very purpose.

Willis labels his subjects "progressives" instead of moderates. This is an important distinction, and it would have been helpful if Willis had explained why he chose this terminology. He writes that for Baptists "racism was primarily a moral question, and moral questions were individual questions" (p. 4). This statement was not a given, however, and Willis does not acknowledge the complicated nature of his claim. For many white southerners, racism and segregation were political questions, divorced from morality and religion. The progressive missionaries' goal may have been to try to change that. But they had to overcome longstanding racism and the suspicion that they were engaging in a dangerous mixture of religion and politics.

Willis approaches an old topic with fresh sources, ones that have been largely overlooked by previous historians of the denomination. He relies heavily on SBC missions publications, magazines published by the Home Mission Board, the Foreign Mission Board, the Women's Missionary Union, and the Royal Ambassadors (a boys' youth group). The potential problem here, of course, is that this is largely prescriptive literature and the published ideas of a highly select group of Baptists. Southern Baptist churches were (and are) aggressively voluntaristic and congregational, and decisions made at the denominational level are not binding on any local church. Just because official literature and paid denominational representatives denounced racism and espoused integration does not mean that the average layperson responded favorably and embraced the goals of the mainstream civil rights movement.

Willis is aware of this, of course, and attempts to preempt a reviewer's critique. He notes that the progressive vision of race relations has come to dominate the Convention and that even otherwise conservative Southern Baptists today would not argue that segregation was in any way Christian. This is no doubt true, but the problem with that argument is the same one that exists with Willis's sources. It points to the ideas and visions of the denominational leadership and ignores the fact that, with important exceptions, Southern Baptist churches largely abandoned urban settings and followed their white parishioners to their suburbs.

This is not to suggest that Willis is wrong. Indeed, there is corroborating evidence from other scholars that this book is right on. Willis contributes to an emerging body of literature that suggests that the South's largest denomination was not as one-dimensional as its first historians suggested. No one has argued that the earlier interpretation was altogether wrong, only that the reality was more complex and in need of greater nuance. Indeed, we now know that there were, in effect, at least two competing visions of Southern Baptists' responsibilities toward African Americans. The first of those visions was the mainstream white Baptist belief that segregation was at least biblically permissible if not divinely sanctioned. The second has been the focus of recent scholarship.

In 1997 Paul Harvey published a highly regarded study of white and black Baptists in the South during the Reconstruction and New South periods. Rather than cultural captivity, Harvey described competing and complementary cultures, black and white, and demonstrated the dialectic in which those cultures were engaged. Harvey described "social Christianity" (rather than social gospel) among white Baptists that "involves envisioning a public role for Christians in reforming and regulating human institutions, without necessarily seeing this public role as primary."[4] That is, rather than cultural captivity, white southern Christians engaged the secular sphere and applied Christian teaching (or their understanding of that teaching) to public concerns. That did not always translate into activism for racial justice, but Mark Newman has described much more fluidity in white Southern Baptists' attitudes toward civil rights and desegregation than previously acknowledged.[5] The Southern Baptist Convention originally endorsed the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and individual congregations struggled with the local implications of desegregation.

All According to God's Plan is organized thematically rather than strictly chronologically. The decision to structure the book this way has its own internal logic, but it occasionally means repetition from chapter to chapter. Nevertheless, this is a solid, workman-like piece of scholarship that enriches our understanding of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Notes

[1]. See Samuel S. Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

[2]. Rufus Spain, *At Ease in Zion: Social History of*

Southern Baptists, 1865-1900 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967).

[3]. John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972).

[4]. Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 198.

[5]. Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2001).

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