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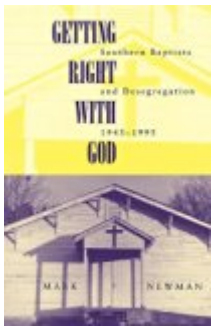
Mark Newman. *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995.* Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2001. xii + 292 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8173-1060-8.



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A View From the Pew

Mark Newman examines the evolution of thought on racial issues in Southern Baptist churches during the last half of the twentieth century. He argues that Southern Baptists, and other southern white Christians, accepted racial desegregation only after secular society changed its views about race relations in response to legal changes initiated by the federal government in the 1950s and 1960s. He further contends that "the real opinions and feelings of Southern Baptists on racial issues can be discerned with a greater degree of accuracy than those of members of hierarchical denominations" because Baptist churches were congregational in nature and because their leaders generally reflected the feelings of their members in sermons and publications (p. vii).

In accordance with traditional theories of the sociology of religion, therefore, Southern Baptists generally supported the existing social order. They accepted segregation until it conflicted with their commitment to law and order, public education, and domestic and foreign evangelism. Their commitment to these issues, Newman maintains, ultimately proved to be more important than their commitment to segregation.

The book begins with an overview of race relations in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) between 1845 and 1944. Although antebellum churches were largely biracial, they became segregated after the Civil War as the newly freed slaves sought to establish their independence from whites and as white Southern Baptists came to support Jim Crow segregation in secular society. In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s a few whites acknowledged the inequities inherent in racial segregation, and called for true equality in accommodations and social services for blacks under the continuation of Jim Crow.

Newman divides post-World War II Southern Baptists into three groups. Militant segregationists used the Bible--especially the Old Testament--to argue that racial segregation was ordained by God and should be maintained. Moderate segregationists accepted the existing social order and, in the late forties and early fifties, contended that segregation should continue because southern laws

supported it. When legal changes in the 1950s opened the door for desegregation, moderates reluctantly acceded to the new social order, but they did not readily embrace it until the 1960s. The landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 was a turning point in Southern Baptist views on segregation, Newman argues, because it influenced their commitment to law and order, evangelism, and public education. The third group, progressives, played an important role in Baptist life by using denominational papers, commissions, and conventions to encourage Southern Baptists to fully accept and support "the demise of legal segregation" (p. 20).

Newman maintains that SBC attitudes on race progressed through three stages of development. Between 1945 and 1954 a progressive minority promoted racial equality and unity and condemned racial violence. They did not directly criticize institutionalized segregation, but they began to undermine the traditional rationale for maintaining the practice by drawing attention to the inequities that were inherent in the Jim Crow system. Progressives had to work slowly when convincing militant and moderate segregationists that racial discrimination was wrong. The church was entrenched in the existing social order, and it often proved to be conservative and resistant to change. Only after secular society began to accept desegregation did the white religious community also accept it.

From 1954 through 1963, Southern Baptist progressives used denominational papers, commissions, and conventions to convince their co-religionists to maintain their commitment to law and order and comply with the *Brown* decision. They "played a supporting role, behind the civil rights movement and the federal government, in the transfiguration of the South's race relations," Newman contends. "Although they did not initiate change, progressives did help many Southern Baptists to adjust to and eventually accept it" (p. 85).

The SBC and state conventions refused to endorse Massive Resistance because they opposed the violence that often accompanied the defiance of court-ordered desegregation. Although many Southern Baptists preferred segregation, they reluctantly accepted the new social order out of a fear of chaos and disorder--not out of a sense of social justice. Newman also contends that Southern Baptists' commitment to public education was stronger than their commitment to segregation and that they ultimately acquiesced to token integration. He concludes, however, that Southern Baptists accepted desegregation only because they supported public education in principle and because private schools cost too much--not because they believed segregation was inherently wrong.

Their commitment to evangelism was also crucial to their rejection of segregated schools and churches. Missionaries complained that racial tensions in the United States undermined their ability to evangelize in foreign countries, especially in Asia and Africa, where indigenous peoples were at the time rejecting white colonial rule. Progressives in the Woman's Missionary Union and the Christian Life Commission publicized the missionaries' grievances in their publications and resolutions, and the SBC eventually encouraged local churches to support desegregation at home.

Newman argues that, after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the increased violence associated with massive resistance, progressives successfully convinced significant numbers of moderates to accept desegregation and reject racial discrimination as immoral. The SBC passed a resolution in 1965 that supported the Civil Rights Act and encouraged Southern Baptists to maintain respect for the rule of law. In 1968 it adopted the "Statement Concerning The Crisis In Our Nation," which called for an end to segregation and encouraged Southern Baptists to work toward "equal opportunities in public services, education and employment" (p. 84).

The crisis statement was important, according to Newman, because it demonstrated how successful progressives had been in persuading the SBC to appropriate their views on race. By the early 1970s race liberals had convinced many Baptist colleges, universities, and seminaries to adopt non-discriminatory admissions policies, but there was seldom more than token integration at these schools. In fact, Southern Baptists in the early seventies followed the lead of the secular culture by turning their attention away from race relations and toward other issues facing American society.

Newman persuasively argues that Southern Baptists reluctantly accepted desegregation when it conflicted with their commitment to law and order, public education, and evangelism. He is less convincing, however, in arguing that Southern Baptists came to support integration; it seems more likely that they simply became less ardent about maintaining the old social order. Although progressives convinced the SBC to officially adopt their desegregationist views, Newman's evidence does not demonstrate how the Southern Baptist laity internalized those views or accepted progressive attitudes about race relations.

Newman admits that Southern Baptists in the early 1970s joined the white flight to the suburbs, sent their children to all-white private schools, and opposed busing. Despite the advances that progressives made in the 1950s and 1960s, Southern Baptist churches were still predominantly white at the end of the twentieth century. Of the nearly fifteen million SBC members in 1990, only 300,000 were African American. There were 37,700 SBC churches that year but only 1,500 of those were predominantly black, most of which held dual affiliations with the SBC and African American denominations. A 1993 report to the SBC's Home Mission Board, titled "Racial/Ethnic Diversity in the Southern Baptist Convention," suggests that there was an increase in black churches between 1985 and 1992, but it did not find increased racial diversity within individual congregations. [1] More recent statistics from the North American Missionary Board's Web site indicate that the SBC's racial make-up had not changed much at the end of the 1990s.[2]

Newman relied on the official papers and resolutions of the national and state conventions to demonstrate how Southern Baptists came to accept desegregation, but he failed to examine congregational and associational records, which would have provided greater insight into the Southern Baptist laity's reaction to desegregation. Nor did Newman interview many people who participated in this struggle (only two are listed in the bibliography), which could have shed light on some important gaps in his story. He acknowledges that many progressives left the SBC because they were frustrated with the slow pace of reform; interviewing those individuals might have explained why the pace was so slow.

Given the length of the dissertation from which this book was derived, one can understand why he chose to omit local sources, but those records tell an important part of the story. Newman contends that Southern Baptist leaders reflected the opinions and feelings of the Southern Baptist laity, but he should have allowed the laity to speak for themselves. Nevertheless, this is an excellent book that fills an important gap in the denominational literature of southern churches. More denominational studies on this topic are needed, but scholars must think congregationally when they write them if we are to gain a better understanding of the perspective from the pew.

Notes

[1]. Clay L. Price, "Racial/Ethnic Diversity in the Southern Baptist Convention" (Report to the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, Tennessee, 1993).

[2]. North American Missionary Board, available via World Wide Web at <http://www.namb.net/evangelism/Statistics/

NAMB*Fact*Sheet_2000.htm>, accessed April 22, 2002.

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