

“Never Had I Been So Blind”: W. A. Criswell’s “Change” on Racial Segregation

Curtis W. Freeman

The Fiery Sermon

On February 21, 1956, W. A. Criswell addressed the South Carolina Baptist evangelism conference. Criswell was pastor of the largest congregation in the Southern Baptist Convention and one of the denomination’s most popular preachers. Standing in the grand pulpit of the First Baptist Church of Columbia before an overflow crowd, he exhorted his listeners, many of whom were fellow ministers, to be true preachers of the gospel. But he warned



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them that a passion for evangelism comes at the cost of undergoing a “baptism by fire.” Describing the sort of fiery ordeals they must face, Criswell segued into a heated attack on the forces of desegregation. He expressed astonishment at the cowardice of ministers “whose forebears [sic] and predecessors were martyrs and were burned at the stake” but who themselves refuse to speak up about “this thing of integration.” True ministers, he argued, must passionately resist government mandated desegregation because it is “a denial of all that we believe in.” This rhetorical move portrayed Southern Baptists as the *de facto* established church of the South and gave the ministers the privilege to speak for all white southerners. He denounced as “foolishness” and “idioty” the recent ruling of the Supreme Court that was meant to ram integration down the collective throat of the South. Irritated with the carpet bagging supporters of civil rights, he exclaimed: “Let them integrate. Let them sit up there in their dirty shirts and make all their fine speeches. But they are all a bunch of infidels, dying from the neck up.”¹¹

Criswell saved some of his harshest invectives for the National Council of Churches and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He challenged his fellow Baptists to hold the line against those “two-by scathing, good-for-nothing fellows who are trying to upset all of the

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¹ “An Address By Dr. W. A. Criswell, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, To the Joint Assembly” (Wednesday, February 22, 1956), Duke University Library, Special Collections; “Baptist Leader Blasts Integration as ‘Idiocy’” *The State* (February 22, 1956), 1; “Dallas Pastor Challenges Race Integration in Church,” *(Dallas Times Herald)* (February 22, 1956), 1; “Criswell Rips Integration,” *Dallas Morning News* (February 23, 1956), 1; “Dallas Pastor Stirs Controversy With Statements on Integration,” *The Baptist Message* (March 1, 1956), 1. Also Andrew Michael Manis, *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict: Black and White Baptists and Civil Rights, 1947-1957* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 65; Manis, “Dying From the Neck Up: Southern Baptist Resistance to the Civil Rights Movement,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 34/1 (Winter 1999): 33; Blake Killingsworth, “‘Here I Am, Stuck in the Middle with You’: The Baptist Standard, Texas Baptist Leadership, and School Desegregation, 1954 to 1956,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 41/2 (Spring 2006): 78-103; John W. Storey, *Texas Baptist Leadership and Social Christianity, 1900-1980* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1986), 183-84.

things that we love as good old Southern people and as good old Southern Baptists." With a jab aimed at ecumenical church leaders who were pushing integration, he asserted, that half of the things they say "are just as blasphemous and unbiblical as they can be." "Let them stay where they are," he exclaimed, "but leave us alone." Still, he confessed, it was not easy to withstand such fierce criticism, claiming that integrationists had done their best to make him feel "like a dirty, low-down, mangy louse of a dog." Criswell admitted that in many respects their shame technique was working. Then in an ingratiating attempt at humor he invoked a thinly veiled racial epithet as a punch line that came close to violating the most sacrosanct rule of polite southern social etiquette: "Why the NAACP has got those East Texans on the run so much," he jibed, "that they dare not pronounce the word chigger any longer. It has to be cheegro." The ugliness and insensitivity of his remark was not easily forgotten or forgiven.²

The bottom line, Criswell argued, was that forced desegregation was fundamentally undemocratic and unchristian, and he suggested that anyone who claimed to be "altogether desegregated is soft in the head." He explained that he tried to segregate his daughter "from people that are iniquitous and vile and dirty and low down." Denominations also segregated as they "mutually agree to worship apart." The same, he said, obtained to racial segregation in the church. Challenging the integrationist view that African Americans were in favor of desegregation, he countered that black churches wanted to be segregated, and they should be allowed to stick "within their group," "their social stratum," "their kind." Criswell was not against integration in principle, admitting to having witnessed social interaction on the mission field where "desegregated life is just marvelous." He further added that segregation was not the ultimate will of God: "In heaven we'll all be together," he laughed. But forced desegregation this side of glory was wrong. Cloaking the Baptist principles of soul liberty and congregational autonomy in the patriotic language of personal privacy and individual freedom, he ended with a powerful appeal to be left alone:



W. A. Criswell, Pastor FBC Dallas

Don't force me by law, by statute, by Supreme Court decision . . . to cross over in those intimate things where I don't want to go. Let me build my life. Let me have my church. Let me have my school. Let me have my friends. Let me have my home. Let me have my family. And what you give to me, give to every man in America and keep it like our glorious forefathers made it—a land of the free and the home of the brave.³

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary Professor Stewart Newman, who spoke at the evangelism conference the following day, alluded to Criswell's sermon, saying that too many of his fellow Baptists were "bragging about what they could do and disparaging those who disagree with them in ungentlemanly terms." Then, in a direct reference to the theme of Criswell's address, Newman remarked,

If I should invoke trial by fire, it is this: When we were an underprivileged people, we had to be in good humor. Now that we have grown strong and rich and now that there is nothing we can't do, we are sorely tempted to brag about what we can do and 'pride goeth before destruction' just as truly today as it ever did.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Hard-line segregationists who had an upper hand in the Baptist State Convention of South Carolina at the time of the speech welcomed Criswell's support, but reactions from around the Southern Baptist Convention were more mixed. Governor George Bell Timmerman, Jr., a member of the First Baptist Church of Batesburg, South Carolina, and an ardent segregationist, was elated to have such a prominent minister openly challenge integrationists. He invited Criswell to address the state legislature the next day where Criswell gave the same speech, but without reference to the Scripture text. Senator Strom Thurmond introduced Criswell approvingly to his fellow South Carolina lawmakers, who the same day passed a resolution asking the United States Attorney General to put the NAACP on the Justice Department's subversive list and to ban NAACP members from public employment.⁴

Back in Dallas, the South Carolina speech was front page news for two days, although the article reporting on Criswell's "fiery talk" was curiously absent from the early edition of the paper that Criswell read every morning. When contacted by reporters, Criswell commented that he stood behind his statements, adding that his mind had been fixed on these matters "all my life." The following day the *Dallas Morning News* printed reactions to Criswell's speech by local clergy. The comments were mostly negative, though Ralph Langley, the somewhat moderate pastor of the Wilshire Baptist Church of Dallas, not only agreed with Criswell's argument for the segregation of the church, he also asserted that "separate but equal facilities for the Negro satisfies" recent Supreme Court rulings. Either Langley was confused that the Brown decision overruled "separate but equal" or he was still trying to have it both ways. When asked if he had supporters, Criswell did not mention fellow Southern Baptist Langley, though he maintained that Rev. Ernest Estell, a leader among the National Baptists in Dallas, defended him against the press, which he claimed had blown the matter out of proportion and was misquoting him. Estell indeed expressed shock and disbelief at the reports, stating that "I can hardly conceive of Dr. Criswell taking any kind of stand against first class citizenship for Negroes." Estell continued, "I would like to express doubt that he ever made such statements."⁵

An editorial in the *Dallas Morning News* commended Criswell with tongue in cheek, suggesting, "Maybe the good doctor over-said himself, but, praise the Lord, he didn't mumble. It ought to clear the air." The piece went on to criticize the duplicity of a progressive Dallas minister who preached for desegregation while the parochial school in his church was still segregated and would likely remain so. Alluding to Criswell's defense of the Southern taboo against inter-racial marriage, the columnist stated that he at least had the gumption to stand on his hind legs and say that desegregation is "going to get into your family." The commentator concluded, "This is true,

⁴ "Wake Forest 'Monk' Warns Baptists Against 'Ungentlemanly' Criticism," *The State* (February 23, 1956), 1D; and Stewart A. Newman personal notes (October 3, 1988), North Carolina Baptist Collection, Wake Forest University Library. Newman's prepared notes dealt with the topic of "Getting Religion" and bear no apparent similarity with the report of his actual speech that he seems to have changed to respond to Criswell's tirade. The biblical text of Criswell's sermon was either Matthew 3:11 or Luke 3:16, in which John the Baptist declares that the coming one "shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire." By comparing Criswell's address to the South Carolina legislature the next day with the press reports of his sermon at the evangelism conference, it is clear that they are essentially the same speech with minor adaptations. Interview with Brantley Spivey, director of the Baptist Student Union at the University of South Carolina at the time, who was present for both the sermon and the address. Spivey said, "Criswell gave the same speech." When I pointed out that the "cheegro" joke was not in the published text of Criswell's "Address To the Joint Assembly," he said, "I heard both speeches, and he told it both times." On the South Carolina Legislature, see "NAACP Again Target of Assembly Measures," *The State* (February 23, 1956), 1.

⁵ "Criswell Rips Integration: Minister Delivers Fiery Talk," *The Dallas Morning News* (February 23, 1956), 1; "Criswell Talk Stirs Comment," *The Dallas Morning News* (February 24, 1956), 1. In early edition of *The Dallas Morning News*, which Criswell read every morning, the report of his South Carolina talk was curiously absent. In its place was a United Press article about "Mideast War Talk Mounting."

brethren, and we might as well face it. If you want to raise White Face Herfords, you keep Milking Shorthorns out of the pasture."⁶

The most famous member of First Baptist Church of Dallas, Billy Graham, was quick to distance himself from Criswell's remarks, telling reporters: "My Pastor and I have never seen eye to eye on the race question." The *Christian Century* tempered its criticism, suggesting that Criswell was not the Southern Baptist pope, but spoke only for himself. Others, however, implied that Criswell was in fact a kind of populist version of a Baptist *magisterium*. T. C. Smith observed, "It seems to me that Criswell now considers himself as the authority among Southern Baptists. A little power has gone to his head. Perhaps he even considers himself as a sort of a Southern Baptist pope." Criswell appeared to be stunned by the reactions. He admitted to being especially struck by a personal letter from Porter Routh, the executive secretary of the Southern Baptist Convention, who confessed to having been painfully awakened in the middle of the night by the burden of Criswell's ugly racist diatribe. Routh apparently contacted Criswell about newspaper reports on his South Carolina address, and in a letter dated March 23, 1956, Criswell replied to Routh and enclosed a copy of his address to the South Carolina Joint Assembly. Implying that he had done nothing for which he should be ashamed, Criswell wrote, "See if the address is what the newspaper reported." Still, the intensity of the reactions to his "fiery talk" caught Criswell by surprise and continued to weigh on him over the years.⁷

The Open Door

Twelve years later, the Southern Baptist Convention met in Houston. On June 5, 1968 the messengers approved "A Statement Concerning the Crisis in Our Nation," which took a remarkably progressive stand on racial discrimination. It confessed a share of responsibility for the failure to create "conditions in which justice, order, and righteousness can prevail." It urged members to work for equality in "education, employment, and housing," and pledged to open the door of church membership to "every person irrespective of race or class." That the strongly worded statement passed by a super majority of 73% was surprising to convention outsiders and insiders alike. But equally unexpected was the election of W. A. Criswell as convention president, who in the minds of so many symbolized the history of segregation that the Southern Baptists were trying to put behind them. The crisis statement, however, was no more of a secret than Criswell's interest in becoming president of the SBC. A draft of the document was endorsed in May by over seventy convention leaders, including the heads of most of the denominational agencies and state conventions. Still, it was hotly debated for several hours in the executive committee, meeting the day prior to the convention, before a revised version was unanimously approved.⁸

⁶ Lynn Landrum, "Thinking Out Loud," *The Dallas Morning News* (February 24, 1956), 3/1.

⁷ Billy Graham's statement was widely quoted in the press reports: "Segregation in the Church," *Newsweek* (March 12, 1956), 64; "Texas Pastor's Comments on Race Shock Fellow Baptists," *Christian Century* (March 14, 1956), 338. "Criswell Not the Pope Of Southern Baptists," (March 14, 1956), 325. Letter from T. C. Smith, quoted in James E. Towns, ed. *The Social Conscience of W. A. Criswell* (Dallas: Crescendo, 1977), 30. Criswell refers to the letter by Porter Routh in "The Church of the Open Door" in *The Social Conscience of W. A. Criswell*, 168. Criswell-Routh correspondence in the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Race Relations (Segregation, etc.) 1948-56.

⁸ *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1968), 67-69; "Southern Baptists Approve a Strong Racial Stand," *New York Times* (June 6, 1968), 65; "Baptists Release Integration Vote," *New York Times* (June 7, 1968), 40; "Admission of Guilt," *Time* (June 14, 1968), 1; "Baptists Approve 'Race' Statement," *Dallas Morning News* (June 5, 1968), 13A; "Baptists Approve Rights Statement," *Dallas Morning News* (June 5, 1968), 13A; "Baptist Urges Fight on Racism," *Dallas Morning News* (June 5, 1968), 13A. A 1968 study by the SBC Home Mission Board reported that 510 affiliated congregations had black members and 3,724 churches were willing to receive black members. By 1980 the number of SBC congregations that had black members grew to at least 3,000. See *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, 4 vols., eds. Clifton Judson Allen, and others (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958-1982), s.v. "Race Relations," 3:1929 and 4:2431.

In many respects Criswell was the natural candidate. He was the pastor of the largest church in the SBC, the convention was meeting in his home state, and it was the centennial anniversary of the First Baptist Church of Dallas. His election may have come as a shock to some observers, but behind the scenes Porter Routh and other executive committee insiders supported Criswell's candidacy in part because they knew he would mitigate the fallout from convention conservatives, which they expected as a result of the race statement. The mollifying effect of Criswell's presidency on segregationist conservatives in the SBC is evident in a letter by a pastor to Criswell written just after his election: "Those of us who saw the social gospel trend beaten back some three decades ago regret the trend which our Convention is now taking. Knowing your sound basic approach in all matters, you may be assured of our very fervent prayers and great confidence in you. You are indeed our hope for leading us back to the faith of our fathers."⁹

Because of Criswell's well-known record of support for segregation, his election as president of the SBC seems strikingly incongruous with the convention's approval of the progressive statement on race. As David Goza observes, "Many denominational leaders desired a candidate who would lead the SBC into the theological mainstream and who could communicate social sensitivity on the race issue. For many the possibility of a W. A. Criswell presidency was a discouraging prospect." Denominational progressives were disappointed. However, this alone does not sufficiently account for the executive committee's support of Criswell's candidacy. Denominational insiders valued him as a stabilizing force on the conservative, pro-segregation wing of the denomination. The behind the scenes politics that led to Criswell's election are apparent when one looks beyond the news reports and examines personal correspondence.¹⁰

On May 22 before the 1968 convention, W. C. Fields, the public relations secretary of the SBC, wrote Criswell concerning "the possibility that you may be elected the next president of the Southern Baptist Convention." Fields suggested that at the presidential press conference, reporters "will be intensely interested in the viewpoints of the new president." Criswell took the letter as an indication that he was the candidate favored by denominational loyalists, and he was smart enough to anticipate what Fields meant when he alluded to the "questions likely to be asked and the topics discussed." The changing tide on the race issue had certainly not escaped his notice. He realized that he risked facing the kind of controversy he encountered after his 1956 speech. Criswell replied to Fields, "In the event that the election to the presidency comes to me, I shall follow your direction minutely and faithfully." After receiving Fields' letter, Criswell called an emergency meeting of the church deacons for May 28, just seven days before the Convention, in an attempt to forestall criticism. They agreed to his suggestion to support in principle a racially open church membership. That Criswell called the meeting to address the church membership policy on race almost immediately upon receiving the letter from Fields strongly suggests that the deacons meeting was in response to the letter and the gentle pressure from the SBC executive committee. It indicates that the "surprising" election of Criswell was at the instigation of the politics of the center by denominational loyalists.¹¹

⁹ Criswell's election as president of the SBC coincided with the centennial celebration of the First Baptist Church of Dallas. Leon McBeth, *The First Baptist Church: Centennial History (1868-1968)* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968). Letter from James W. Parrish of Winter Park, Florida to Dr. Criswell (June 18, 1968) in Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Criswell letters file.

¹⁰ David Louis Goza, "W. A. Criswell's Formative Role in the Conservative Resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention," PhD dissertation Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, August 2006, 121. While it is undoubtedly true that many Southern Baptists were surprised and others were disappointed by Criswell's election, his support from the SBC executive committee members was strong.

¹¹ Letter from W. C. Fields to W. A. Criswell (May 22, 1968) and Criswell's reply (May 27, 1968), in Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, W. C. Fields papers. Criswell mentions a meeting with the finance committee of First Baptist Church of Dallas sometime in the spring of 1968 when he brought up the subject of the racially closed membership policy as a reason he was seriously considering not allowing his name to be put forward in June as a

In an emotion-charged press conference, reporters in Houston asked Criswell if he still held the same views on race. "I've changed," he said. "I have enlarged my sympathies and my heart during the past few years." When they inquired about his remarks on segregation that were distributed by the racist White Citizens' Council, he tried to pass off their questions, quipping, "I never said 99 percent of what I was supposed to have said." And when pressed about whether membership in his congregation was open to people of all races, he tried to dodge the issue, suggesting that the door of the church was open to anyone "who came sincerely." In his changed opinion, he explained, all people need salvation. Realizing that he had to give a fuller account, but on his own terms, he did not wait long.¹²



W.A. Criswell "turned the press table into a pulpit as he fielded questions, often hostile, to emphasize his convictions. Leaning forward, he jabbed constantly with his index finger and occasionally slapped his right hand into his left to tick off his positions." (*The Baptist Standard*, June 12, 1968, page 6).

On June 9, 1968, his first Sunday back in the pulpit after being elected president of the SBC, Criswell preached a sermon entitled, "The Church of the Open Door." Taking his text from the words of Christ in the book of Revelation to the church of Philadelphia, he called on his congregation to reverse its *de facto* segregationist membership policy and become "a Philadelphian



church of the open door." In the sermon he described an emotional meeting with the church deacons the week just prior to the convention. He had asked them what they expected him to do if one Sunday he extended the altar call and "down one of these aisles . . . comes a little girl . . . and she is black." He declared, "I am done with the emptiness of an appeal." With the backing of the deacons and the congregation, Criswell proclaimed that "the First Baptist Church in Dallas is now and forever a Philadelphian church of the open door." Adding, "Anybody can come, anybody." Not long after his open door sermon, Criswell asserted during a nationally broadcast radio program that those who seek biblical support for segregation "do not read the Bible right." Further

candidate for SBC president in "Church of the Open Door," in *Baptists See Black*, ed. Wayne Dehoney (Waco: Word Books, 1969), 79.

¹² "Dr. Criswell Charges Misrepresentation," *Dallas Morning News* (June 6, 1968), 9A; "New Southern Baptist Leader Fully Backs Open Church Policy," *Houston Chronicle* (June 6, 1968), 1; and "Outspoken W. A. Criswell Elected SBC President," *Baptist Press* (June 5, 1968).

distancing himself from militant conservatives, he proclaimed, "I don't think that segregation could have been or was at any time intelligently, seriously supported by the Bible."¹³

During the first year of his presidency Criswell continued to lean toward the center. In his address to the SBC executive committee on September 17, 1968 he alluded to speculations that the convention was headed for a breakup. Dismissing the fissiparous scenarios, he joked, "We're too soft to split," but he admitted, "We sure can fray." Yet despite what he described as "the spirit of disintegration, divisiveness, and division," Criswell made it clear that he was intent on holding the convention together around five great truths: love for the Lord, the lost, the Book, the brother, and the right. In the end the gambit to support Criswell's presidency by the forces of the political center proved to be a successful strategy in keeping the convention together. Progressives on the whole, though disappointed about Criswell's election, were willing to put aside their apprehensions and move toward implementing the 1968 crisis statement on race. Conservatives, despite their concerns about the liberal direction of the convention leadership, seemed reassured that the SBC was under the watchful care of Criswell, whom they regarded as a man of firm conviction and fundamental doctrinal soundness. But the odd prospect of Criswell as a unifying figure depended upon his ability to adapt and change his views on race while at the same time appearing to stand firm for the unchanging principles of the faith. It was a task at which Criswell proved to be remarkably adept.¹⁴

The Leopard's Spots

Commenting on the changing views of segregationists like Criswell, historian Andrew Manis states that civil rights was the one and only instance in which liberals in the SBC won the war. Baptist theologian Russell Moore disputes this widely shared claim that credits liberals with the advances in civil rights over the obstructionism of conservatives. Instead, Moore maintains that conservative evangelical religion, not the liberal social gospel, was responsible for overcoming segregation. Moore contends that Southern Baptist progressives have been falsely given credit for crucifying Jim Crow. Contrary to the consensus view represented by scholars like Manis that stresses liberal political pressure, Moore contends that "Jim Crow was . . . drowned, in a baptistery," adding that conservatives only "needed theological liberals to remind us of what we said we believed." Progressives who advocated for civil rights played a role in defeating segregation, but Moore holds that because they realized the theological bankruptcy of the social gospel, liberals adopted the strategy of shaming conservatives with the message of born again religion until conservatives came to see segregation as a repudiation of the gospel. Liberals, he continues, "appealed not to America's reason, but to America's conscience" by issuing a call to evangelical and revivalist notions of individual conversion and churchmanship: "It is to our own shame that we ignored our own doctrines to advance racial pride. And it is to our further shame that, in so many cases, we needed theological liberals to remind us of what we said we believed."¹⁵

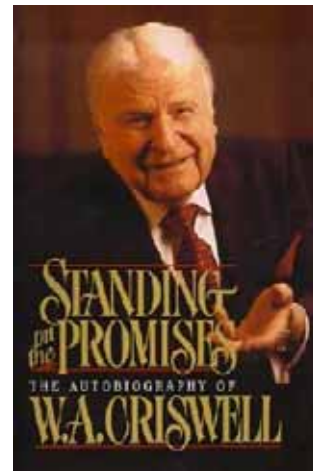
¹³ A less edited version of the open door sermon may be found in "The Church of the Open Door," in *The Social Conscience of W. A. Criswell*, 162-71. A more polished edition of the text was included in the widely disseminated collection of sermons on race by Southern Baptist leaders, *Baptists See Black*, 73-82. "W. A. Criswell is New President," *Baptist Standard* (June 12, 1968), 6-7; "Church Said Open to All Races," *Baptist Standard* (June 12, 1968), 3. "Baptist Leader Raps Racism, Segregation in Broadcast," *Baptist Standard* (July 17, 1968), 3; "Criswell Condemns Racism," *The Baptist Messenger* (July 18, 1968), 4. See also Storey, *Texas Baptist Leadership and Social Christianity*, 197-98.

¹⁴ "God's Unchanging Hand," tape recording of Criswell's address to the executive committee (September 17, 1968), in Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, tape HC5169tSou.

¹⁵ Andrew Manis, "Dying From the Neck Up," 34; and Russell D. Moore, "Crucifying Jim Crow: Conservative Christianity and the Quest for Racial Justice," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 8/2 (Summer 2004): 4-23. Moore cites as his main example of the scholarly consensus that vindicates the liberal victory in civil rights, Jerrold M. Packard, *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002).

Moore's implication, that appeals to conscience are conservative but that challenges based in reason are liberal, over-generalizes. Progressive voices in the SBC like Porter Routh and Clifton Allen who led the way in drafting the 1968 "Statement Concerning the Crisis in Our Nation" over the objections of conservative evangelicals were not rationalistic liberals merely borrowing conservative evangelical language in the sense Moore ascribes. Nor does his remarkable claim square with the history of aggressive and residual white supremacy that was endorsed by conservative Southern Baptists like Criswell who distinguished between the evangelical gospel of soul salvation, which they affirmed, and the social gospel of soup and soap, which they despised. Just in case anyone might be left wondering what could possibly lead someone to such a radical revisionist interpretation of civil rights, Moore has a simple answer. He was concerned that liberals were continuing the same strategy by putting pressure on contemporary evangelicals "to accept new movements—from feminism to homosexual liberation and beyond—as the legitimate heirs of the civil rights movement."¹⁶ In his rush to counter new liberal advances, Moore conjectures that as conservatives were victorious over liberals in the Baptist battles, so they must also have bested liberals in the race battles. Given that from 1956 to 1979 Criswell was a definitive voice of conservative evangelical theology, his altered views on race provide a case study to test Moore's argument.

To even the casual observer, it is clear that something more than biblicism was driving Criswell's change. Before he delivered the open door sermon he had already preached through the entire book of Revelation, including chapter three, where there was no hint of any application to race or church membership. But to portray him as a mere opportunist, willing to pander to the powers that be, fails to do justice to his personal struggle on the race question. How did he understand his change? After his election to the presidency, Criswell alluded to his changing views on race in an address to the SBC executive committee. His sermon was entitled "God's Unchanging Hand" and offered perhaps his most candid confession:



I never had a battle in my heart, I've never faced one in my life, and I never thought I'd have to go through it, as I have these last several years. Nobody in this earth knew that was going on in my soul, but I came to the firm conclusion that I had to change. And this man who needs me, whoever he is, is my brother, and my hand is outstretched.

Criswell suggested that although it took him a long time for his "changing" hand to be outstretched to the black brother, God's "unchanging" hand has always been outstretched. Looking back at his previous statements on race, he exclaimed, "Never had I been so blind." From these comments it is clear that Criswell conceived of his experience as something of a conversion. For an evangelical audience familiar with the logic of conversion testimonies, Criswell's confession that he "was blind" on the race question implied a resolving "but now I see" as witness to the transformation of God's amazing grace. But of what exactly was he blind, and how precisely did he see things differently?¹⁷

¹⁶ Moore, "Crucifying Jim Crow," 4.

¹⁷ His sermon "The Open Door of Philadelphia" preached on October 8, 1961 emphasized the open door of missions. It was subsequently published in *Expository Sermons on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), 161-66. "God's Unchanging Hand," Criswell's address to the SBC Executive Committee (September 17, 1968), a tape recording in Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives. The phrase "was blind, but now I see" is a line from verse one of "Amazing Grace," in John Newton and William Cowper, *The Olney Hymns* (Bucks, England : Arthur Gordon Hugh

In his 1990 autobiography, *Standing on the Promises*, Criswell offered a more detailed explanation of his “change.” Reflecting back on the fiery 1956 South Carolina speech, which he curiously misremembered as occurring before the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision, he suggested that his “off-the-cuff” remarks were misinterpreted and misquoted. His primary concern, he wrote, was “the health and growth of Christ’s body, the church, black and white,” explaining that it was purely on pragmatic grounds that he upheld a “separate but equal” ecclesiology. He went on to denounce racism as “an abomination in the eyes of God,” and he added, it “should be in the eyes of God’s people.” Then he offered an ambiguous confession that stopped short of owning his transgression, stating that “where we who call the name of Christ have knowingly or unknowingly contributed to racism in any form, we have sinned and need to beg God’s forgiveness.”¹⁸

It is reminiscent of other passive voice public confessions—“mistakes were made”—that fail to name the mistakes or take responsibility for them. Criswell further claimed that the First Baptist Church of Dallas always had an “open door” membership policy, which raises questions about his earlier account of the occasion for his 1968 open door sermon. And he suggested that his personal friendships with many of “these dear people”—the black Baptists—showed him to be no racist. Then referring to the South Carolina speech as “one of the most colossal blunders of my young life,” he expressed regret: “I wish with all my heart that I had not spoken on behalf of segregation in any form or in any place.” Now, he was a changed man: “In the following weeks, months, and years, as I prayed, searched the holy Scriptures, preached the gospel, and worked with our people, I came to the profound conclusion that to separate by coercion the body of Christ on any basis was unthinkable, unchristian, and unacceptable to God.”¹⁹

It is noteworthy that Criswell mentions only the speech before the South Carolina legislature, which is understandable because this speech was the basis for the banner headlines labeling him a “hateful segregationist.” Yet it is important to recall that both his 1956 sermon to the South Carolina evangelism conference and his heated speech the next day before the state legislature were essentially the same, and that he had ample time to prepare for and think through his anti-desegregationist remarks at the evangelism conference before he spoke to the legislature. He certainly got sufficient warning from the first time he spoke to be more careful in his repeat performance. That he essentially reiterated the same speech suggests that his comments cannot be dismissed as off-the-cuff.

In his book *But Now I See*, Fred Hobson reflects on what he calls in the subtitle *The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative*. Like earlier Puritan conversion narratives, these racial conversion stories of white southerners employ the language of sin, guilt, blindness, seeing the light, repentance, and redemption. More important than this linguistic resonance, Hobson suggests that genuine racial conversions, like religious ones, are marked by love replacing fear, sinners acquiring new identities, social conflicts being healed, and people being reconciled. What these southern conversion narratives most share with their Puritan forebears, Hobson observes, is “a recognition and confession of the writer’s own sin and the announced need for redemption, as well as a description of the writer’s radical transformation.” Moreover, the motive for both types of narratives is the same—to testify, as a sort of final proof. As a racial conversion narrative the testimony of W. A. Criswell is less than compelling. Did he knowingly or unknowingly contribute to racism in any form? Was he a guilty sinner who needed to beg God’s forgiveness? Even after his confession the answers to these questions remain unclear.²⁰

Osborn for the Cowper & Newton Museum, 1979; facsimile from the 1st ed. at Cowper & Newton Museum published in 1779).

¹⁸ W. A. Criswell, *Standing on the Promises*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 202-204.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Fred Hobson, *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 3-4.

By comparison with other contemporary white Southern conversion narratives, Criswell's generalized confession lacks any content as to racial guilt and offers only regret without repentance. Even after his change he still seemed blind to his participation in the Southern racial orthodoxy of the past, where language was encoded with insensitivity and ugliness, and where social structures ensured privilege and power for whites. For Criswell, as for many other white conservative evangelicals in America, racism was limited to individual-level prejudice and discrimination. To the extent that something changed in him it was at the interpersonal level, and if all individuals were similarly to change there would be no race problem. It is clear that Criswell did not become a born again ex-racist. His change was less radical. Once he defended separate but equal in and out of the church as the will of God, but now God showed him that no group should be judged by the color of their skin. He desired to see only individuals.

Criswell's presidential sermon at the 1969 SBC reflected his changed view on race. He announced that what the world needed was a revival of heartfelt, life-changing, soul-saving Bible religion. Only a heaping dose of "that old time religion," in the words of the old gospel song, "makes [us] love everybody." "Everybody!" he repeated, for the sake of emphasis. This affirmation of the old time religion as the remedy for racism is consistent with the "color blind" perspective of contemporary white evangelical America described by sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith. Their revealing study, *Divided By Race*, analyzes "evangelical religion and the problem of race in America." According to this color blind view, racism is only expressed in individual-level prejudice and discrimination. Consequently, most white evangelicals do not think there is a race problem beyond bad interpersonal relationships, and they dismiss structural explanations of racism as either irrelevant or wrongheaded. Emerson and Smith tell the story of "how well-intentioned people, their values, and their institutions actually recreate racial divisions and inequalities they ostensibly oppose." Here Moore's assertion that the gospel of individualistic personal regeneration led to the end of segregation is contradicted, not only by the consensus judgment of historians, but by research that shows that the individualistic religion of most white evangelicals perpetuates racialization in America.²¹



First Baptist Church Dallas, Texas

But the question remains: Was W. A. Criswell a transformed person when it came to race? Even his professed change at the interpersonal level is left ambiguous due, in part, to uncertainty about how much his unconverted racialized habits of the past continued to be expressed in his speech and behavior after his racial conversion. He had long appealed to a peculiarly racist interpretation of Genesis 9:20-27 as justification for white supremacy. In his famous and often repeated sermon, "The Scarlet Thread Through The Bible," which he preached to the First Baptist Church of Dallas on December 31, 1961, he invoked the old Hamite myth in which Africans and their descendents in America inherited not Noah's curse, but God's curse, that "they should be a servant people." Time and again he returned to the Hamite myth as warrant for opposing school

²¹ W. A. Criswell, "The Two-Edged Sword or Christ in Faith and Work," sermon preached at the 1969 SBC in New Orleans, in Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, SBC Press Kit. Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1. For their analysis of the color blind view of white evangelicals, see Emerson and Smith, 69-91. Moore attempts to mitigate the charges that evangelical individualism is a problem for overcoming racial injustice, "Crucifying Jim Crow," 7.

desegregation. In 1958 Criswell delivered the baccalaureate address to the graduating seniors at W. W. Samuell High School. The Dallas independent school system was still segregated at the time, but the implementation of the *Brown v. Board* decision threatened desegregation. Criswell's speech to the graduates that day was on the curse of Ham, which he argued justified segregation. Although the reference to the curse of Ham was removed by the Broadman Press editors when his sermon on "The Scarlet Thread" was published in 1970, it reappeared in the notes to Genesis 9:25 of *The Criswell Study Bible* in 1979. Though he described "the curse of Canaan" as "more a word of prophecy than the pronouncement of a curse," he still declared that the "degradation . . . of Ham will not be without influence on Canaan and his descendants." It is clear then that even a decade after his views on race and the biblical support for segregation supposedly changed, Criswell continued to conjure up the spirits of white supremacy and implicitly endorsed the resulting racialized social arrangements.²²

It is no shock that some critics failed to take Criswell's testimony at face value. Stewart Newman, who followed Criswell at the 1956 evangelism conference, wrote him a letter after his public statements condemning racism. Newman admitted to having been impressed with the press reports of Criswell's change given his previous "posture of eloquent race-baiting." But he expressed doubts that the change was as extensive as reported, adding that it is difficult for anyone to appraise his own views, "especially in the presence of a considerable element of self-esteem." Newman noted that the times have changed, and public attitudes have grown more receptive to social progress brought about "by the blood of many martyrs . . . who have suffered at the instigation of political demagogues." He further stated that "prophetic" voices like Criswell were responsible for falsely assuring these political powers "that the havoc which they perpetuate is the will of God." Newman then proposed an alternative possibility: "It may be that you have not really changed, W. A. Perhaps you are giving yourself credit for having changed when what you are now doing is what you have been doing very dramatically all the while—namely, telling the people what they want to hear." Caught off balance by such a stinging candid critique, Criswell offered a vague reply: "It is sort of hard to answer this letter. I do not know what to say. If your purpose is to help me, may God grant a fulfillment of your desires."²³

Newman may have been more right about Criswell's "change" than even he understood. Perhaps with Newman in mind, Criswell alluded in his 1972 unpublished oral memoirs to certain Southern Baptist academics that took him to task for his 1956 speech. "They should have done it," he conceded. After that, Criswell said, "My soul and attitude may not have changed, but my public statements did."²⁴ It is a stunning admission that indicates his "change" may have been more a matter of social decorum than personal conviction. Perhaps it is as hard for an old racist to change his ways as for a leopard to change its spots. Newman was also right about the changing times. When Criswell gave his South Carolina speech, the Dallas Independent School District was the largest segregated school system in the South. By 1967, the Dallas schools had been desegregated,

²² Criswell preached the sermon "The Scarlet Thread Through The Bible" at First Baptist Dallas on December 31, 1961. (<http://www.wacriswell.com/index.cfm/FuseAction/Search.Transcripts/sermon/1638.cfm>) accessed March 3, 2007. W. A. Criswell, *The Scarlet Thread Through the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 26. *The Criswell Study Bible*, notes on Gen 9:25 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Publishers, 1979), 19. Interview with Stanley Hauerwas, who was among the 1958 graduates that heard the speech. For the history of interpretation of the curse of Canaan see Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Sylvester Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Thomas Virgil Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1978). For a broader historical treatment of the Hamite myth, see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²³ Letter from Stewart A. Newman to W. A. Criswell (July 18, 1968), North Carolina Baptist Collection, Wake Forest University Library. Criswell's handwritten reply is written on Newman's letter, which he mailed back.

²⁴ Oral Memoirs of W. A. Criswell, Texas Collection, Carroll Library, Baylor University (March 1972), 267, 269.

although it would take another 16 years for the courts to work out all the details. Criswell realized that anti-desegregation was a lost cause and that continuing the fight would only further marginalize him and the church. He understood that the closed racial membership policy would cost him more than the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention. It would have diverted the church from the mainstream to the vulgar backwaters of Dallas society, and he was not about to allow that to happen. As late as 1984 Criswell admitted that he was still not enthusiastic about desegregation. He said, "I've had to accommodate my spirit to it, but I still am against some of it, like busing. The associations you make, you and your family, it has to come out of your heart." He learned how to adapt to the culture, but did his "heart" change? Perhaps this question can best be answered in his own candid yet ambiguous words: "My soul and attitude may not have changed, but my public statements did."²⁵

Criswell's vague confession stands in contrast to the resolution by the SBC on June 20, 1995 on racial reconciliation. Though critics questioned the contrition of the convention and the lateness of the response, still the messengers left no question about their guilt, declaring that they "unwaveringly denounce racism, in all its forms, as deplorable sin" and "lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest." The resolution further offered an apology to all African-Americans for "condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime" and repentance for "racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously or unconsciously." The statement asked for forgiveness "from our African-American brothers and sisters" and pledged to "eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry." Ironically, Richard Land, who began his career at Criswell Institute and had become the executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission, led the effort to get the resolution passed.²⁶

W. A. Criswell discerned the political signs of the times more clearly than anyone could have imagined. He was able to envision the passing of the Dixiecrat politics of the Solid South, and the emergence of a new conservatism that would fit like hand-in-glove with the New Religious Right. He later would be hailed as both the godfather of the conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention and a spiritual advisor in the southern strategy of the Republican revolution. Yet what he wanted more than anything was to be the pastor of the largest Baptist church in the world. His change ensured that would be possible for years to come. Although Criswell has been described as a man of principle and conviction, he more fittingly personified the populist conservatism that was shared by many other white Baptists in the South. They resisted integration in the here and now but were willing to make pragmatic concessions as the social arrangement of Southern culture changed. For the time being the biblical vision of a racially reconciled humanity would have to wait. Nevertheless, as Criswell reminded them, "In heaven we'll all be together."²⁷

²⁵ Under Federal order the Dallas ISD began desegregating in 1961. The school board declared their "stairstep" plan complete in 1967, but litigation continued until 1983 when the school district finally accepted the Fifth Circuit Court's desegregation plan. Lisa Ellis, "Charisma, Influence of Criswell Extend Beyond Steps of Church," *Dallas Times Herald* (August 19, 1984): A45, 54-56.

²⁶ *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1995), 80-81. See also, Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 243-60.

²⁷ Chandler Davidson, *Race and Class in Texas Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 212-20; Dick J. Reavis, "The Politics of Armageddon," *The Texas Observer* (October 1984), 242-44. The priority of the pastoral over the political is nowhere more clear than in a 1983 questionnaire of past SBC presidents Criswell completed for Hugh Wamble of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. When asked to list in order of importance his major contributions to Southern Baptists while serving as SBC president, Criswell listed only one thing: "my work as a pastor-example of building a church." In Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Criswell, W. A., Baptist History File.