

## **One legacy of Landmarkism: Its impact on racial struggles in the Southern Baptist Convention<sup>1</sup>**

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### *Abstract*

The American Civil War precipitated by the slavery question did little to change the attitudes of many of the southerners defeated in that struggle. This fact became clear in the civil rights battles of the mid-twentieth century. One of the new denominations that arose because of irresolvable differences over the slavery question preceding the War was the Southern Baptist Convention. A critical factor in shaping the practice and beliefs of the Convention was Landmarkism, a highly sectarian, exclusivist view of the Baptist Church and its history. Landmark adherents played a critical role in promoting slavery and fostering demeaning views of the Negroes freed from bondage after the War. The impact of Landmarkism in shaping these views has not been widely documented and their vituperative rhetoric published for decades has been treated as of little consequence in shaping Southern Baptist practice or attitudes. Such, however, is not the case.

### **Introduction**

The Landmark movement was perhaps the greatest controversy ever within the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Baptist denomination, and the second largest denomination in America.<sup>2</sup> The Landmark movement was highly sectarian and the attacks of the Landmarkers focused initially on other denominations, but also included those within the Southern Baptist Convention who disagreed with them. Many see Landmarkism as a movement which appeared for a few decades around the middle of the nineteenth century (in

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the DTh thesis: "The Origin, Theology, Transmission, and Recurrent Impact of Landmarkism in the Southern Baptist Convention (1850–2012)" submitted at the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History, and Missiology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria in 2014 under the promotorship of Prof MH. Mogashoa.

<sup>2</sup> The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant denomination in America but the Roman Catholic Church is the largest denomination with over sixty-eight million members.

the decades preceding and following the American Civil War) but one that was largely forgotten in the twentieth century. While it is true that the vast majority of Southern Baptists today cannot define Landmarkism or articulate anything relative to the controversies that were spawned by the Landmarkers, many Landmark principles and doctrines are very visible within the Southern Baptist Convention today.

The Landmarkers held a distinctive view of Church History. The Landmark view of church history (both as a history of the church and as a discipline of study) is unsupported by critical, historical research. However, decades of teaching Baptist Church succession in the seminaries and in the churches have produced numbers of pastors, leaders, and teachers who have inculcated such beliefs into the mainstream of Baptist life. Acceptance of such by large numbers of Southern Baptists is often seen as a curiosity rather than a cause for alarm.

Landmark ecclesiology, central to the controversies, and to the question at hand, centres on the autonomy and authority of the local church and its actions. The high-church<sup>3</sup> attitude of Landmarkism has exerted a powerful influence in the Southern Baptist Convention and fostered an attitude of Baptist Church authority which rivals in some cases anything Rome has said regarding the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. This view has manifested itself time and again in various controversies, in relations or lack thereof with other denominations, in mission work and support, and in the workings of the Southern Baptist Convention itself. This exclusive, sectarian view has impacted many areas of Southern Baptist life. These are explored in my thesis on Landmarkism. The focus of this article will be the impact of Landmarkism on race relations in the Southern Baptist Convention.

#### A short background of Landmarkism

The father of Landmarkism was James Robinson Graves (1820–1893). The author of the tract from which Landmarkism derived its name (*An Old Landmark Re-Set*)<sup>4</sup> was James Madison Pendleton (1813–1891). These two men were the leaders in establishing Landmarkism in the Southern Baptist Convention.

What Pendleton called the “high churchism” of the Landmarkers was a denominational exclusivism that was highly sectarian in its ecclesiology.

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<sup>3</sup> James E. Tull used this term in his work, *High-Church Baptists in the South, The Origin, Nature, and Influence of Landmarkism*, ed. Morris Ashcroft (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000). Actually an article by J.M. Pendleton, 14 April 1855, equated Landmarkism with high-church attitudes. He wrote, “High churchmen must be Old Landmark men.” (*The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 14 April 1855).

<sup>4</sup> J.M. Pendleton, *An Old Landmark Re-Set*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville, TN: Southwest Publishing Co., 1857).

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This exclusive ecclesiology manifested itself in a rejection of non-Baptist ministers since they affirmed that only Baptist ministers are true ministers of the gospel, and only baptism by immersion by an authentic minister of the gospel in a true (i.e., Baptist) church is true baptism. Graves wrote,

that [by] treating the ministers of other denominations as the accredited ministers of the gospel, and receiving any of their official acts – *preaching* or *immersion* – as scriptural, we [would] proclaim louder than we can by words, that their societies are evangelical churches, and their teachings and practices orthodox as our own.<sup>5</sup>

Graves insisted that these other denominations are but “human societies” and represent nothing but “the expression of human *opinion*.”<sup>6</sup>

The Landmark ecclesiology was built around a doctrine of church succession that traced the existence of Baptist churches in an unbroken line back to the time of Christ. They held that Baptist churches “*alone* hold, and have alone ever held, and preserved the doctrine of the gospels in all ages since the ascension of Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

*Contributing factors*

Like all people, Graves was to some extent a product of his environment. The religious environment on the frontier and in the new settlements, of what was then called the southwest, was one of a very competitive nature. The religious, secular, and cultural thought of the day was shaped by a rugged individualism of those who had gone into the wilderness and carved out a life. This individualism marked political, secular, and religious ideas of the day. On the religious front the Second Great Awakening had produced great revivals of religion, particularly in Kentucky. This was a time of schism, conflict, and fragmentation among the mainline denominations, which led to a competition for the hearts, minds, and membership of those in the frontier states. Much of this activity was centred in Kentucky and Tennessee and Graves found himself in the middle of this environment and sought to take his place as the champion of the Baptists. This highly sectarian, competitive environment, fed by the new revivalism, and a shortage of trained ministers, produced an environment wherein controversies flourished and the older orthodoxy fell victim to new measures. These influences shaped Graves to be the compe-

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<sup>5</sup> JR. Graves, *Old Landmarkism: What Is It?* (Memphis, TN: Baptist Book House, Graves, Mahaffey & Co., 1880), 25–26. Graves highlighted his writing with italics, bold type, and all capital letters to make his points stand out.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. (emphasis in original)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. (emphasis in original)

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titive, sectarian, combative, and yet in some ways winsome defender of what he believed to be Baptist (and thus, in his view, true) orthodoxy.

James Madison Pendleton was born in Virginia, 20 November, 1811. In 1829 he made confession of an experience of grace and was baptised at the Bethel Baptist Church in Christian County, Kentucky. That same church licensed him to preach in 1830 and after being ordained in 1833 served four years as the pastor of various churches before being called to the Bowling Green Baptist Church in 1837 where he remained for twenty years.<sup>8</sup> It was in Bowling Green that he met J.R. Graves in 1852.

### *Landmarkism codified*

OL. Hailey gives the following account of Graves' and Pendleton's first meeting:

Graves went to Bowling Green to preach at Pendleton's church. On finding that Pendleton was accustomed to receiving alien immersions Graves was ready to return at once to Nashville for he said, "a visiting minister should not preach from the pulpit of a pastor doctrines contrary to those held by that pastor." Pendleton persuaded Graves to stay because he had "never given the matter of alien immersion a thorough study and shall be glad to hear you preach on that subject." Pendleton subsequently agreed with Graves and Graves asked Pendleton to write a tract "that will set forth the difference between Baptists and Pedo-Baptists, showing why we cannot consistently fellowship with Pedo-Baptists as regular churches of Jesus Christ, nor receive their immersion, nor recognize their ministers as scripturally ordained ministers of the gospel."<sup>9</sup>

The result of Pendleton's work was *An Old Landmark Re-set*, which proved to be the namesake of the Landmark movement. James E. Tull says, this work caused great excitement "throughout the Southern Baptist Convention and put the issue in the center of denominational discussion. At least 40,000 copies of this tract were distributed."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> J.J. Burnett, *Sketches of Tennessee's Pioneer Baptist Preachers* (Nashville, TN: Press of Marshall and Bruce Co., 1919).

<sup>9</sup> Orren L. Hailey, *J.R. Graves, Life, Times, and Teachings* (Nashville, TN: published by the author, June 21, 1929. Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, 1964, microfilm), 76-77.

<sup>10</sup> Tull, *High-Church Baptists in the South*, 4.

### **Landmarkism and slavery**

The Landmarkers were, almost universally, supporters of slavery. Pendleton, however, was not. This is one area that is not widely reported. But his views provide a clear backdrop against which to present the mainstream Landmark views.

It was Pendleton's defence of the Negro as possessing in all respects the same constituent parts as other men and his opposition to slavery which opened the rift between him and the vast majority of Landmarkers and Southern Baptists. This ultimately led to his relocation to the North in the early part of the Civil War. Long before the war Pendleton notes in his journal that the subject of slavery was raised at the Home Mission Society meeting in 1844. He noted that Richard Fuller made a most impressive defence of slavery noting, Fuller argued, "there must be a new Bible before it could be proved that slavery is a sin."<sup>11</sup> In the lead up to the war the religious papers of the South were filled with articles asserting the inferiority of the Negro and many asserted that this was due to the lack of a soul and/or the Curse of Ham. There are many examples. Following are some representative offerings from *The Tennessee Baptist* where Graves served as editor and Pendleton his assistant:

[It is] high heaven's decree, that the two races shall be unequal, that the sons of Ham shall serve in the tents of Shem ... as foreordained by the omnipotent fashioner of the globe.<sup>12</sup>

The black race cannot be prepared during a whole lifetime to take charge of families, or perform the duties of citizens.<sup>13</sup>

Graves said later upon the occasion of Pendleton's departure that he was unaware of any matter on which they disagreed. That is a strange assertion because Pendleton stood firmly opposed to rhetoric such as that found in the examples above. His attempts to temper and refute such talk eventually led to personal attacks upon him and his relocation to Pennsylvania. As the crisis precipitated he wrote, "I feel a supreme contempt for the atrocious prejudice which makes *birthplace* the chief element in calculating merit or demerit."<sup>14</sup> After the war in correspondence with R.L. Breckinridge, discussing the war and God's judgment, Breckinridge wrote, "God has shown by his providence

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<sup>11</sup> JM. Pendleton, "Journal of James Madison Pendleton, 1844, entry for April 26," original in hand of Benjamin Franklin Proctor Collection, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

<sup>12</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 3 January 1852.

<sup>13</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 26 January 1861.

<sup>14</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 23 March 1861. (emphasis in original).

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... that he abhorred that entire perversion of his Holy Word, upon which the Religious Preachers of the South led their flocks to the brink of destruction."<sup>15</sup>

After the war, Pendleton did not endear himself to many in the South largely because he rejected the rhetoric that continued to flow from the religious papers of the South regarding the inferiority of the Negro and his inability to cope with freedom. In an article published in the *New York Examiner* and reprinted in *The Baptist*<sup>16</sup>, Pendleton took on the noted Harvard professor Louis Agassiz.<sup>17</sup> Pendleton quoted Agassiz as saying,

The negro ... has not been endowed by God with the same volume of brain as the white man ... He is an inferior animal to the white man ... There is not a bone in the negro's body relatively of the same shape, size, articulation, or chemically of the same composition as that of the white man's ... Even the negro's blood is chemically different from that which courses in the veins of the white man.<sup>18</sup>

Agassiz believed the different races were created in different locales and that the Genesis account spoke only of the white race. Pendleton, ever the theologian, takes Agassiz to task on this account.

His [Agassiz's] theory requires different creations, and he does not believe that the whole human race has descended from one pair. I give Prof. Agassiz all the honour due him in his legitimate explorations in the wide realm of nature; but when he attempts to make the science of ethnology teach something in conflict with the Bible, I demur.<sup>19</sup>

After many arguments, Pendleton rests his case on the doctrine of redemption. He says he is familiar with Agassiz's reverence for God and respect for the Bible but he adds,

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<sup>15</sup> RL. Breckinridge to JM. Pendleton, 5 February 1886, transcript in hand of Benjamin Franklin Proctor Collection, Kentucky Library and Museum, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY.

<sup>16</sup> *The Baptist* was Graves' newly formed religious periodical which began publication after the American Civil War. His publishing company in Nashville, TN was destroyed by the invading armies of the North.

<sup>17</sup> Louis Agassiz (1807–1873) was a noted paleontologist, glaciologist, and geologist famous for his theories of ice ages and rejection of Darwinian evolution. It is claimed he was not a racist although not all support such a view. See Stephen J. Gould, *The Panda's Thumb* (New York, NY: Norton, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> *The Baptist* (Memphis, TN) 25 June 1868.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

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What avails this while he cherishes a theory which, in its far-reaching implications, unsettles the foundation of human redemption ... the ultimate analysis of the scriptural view of sin and salvation must be sought in the unity of the race of Adam.<sup>20</sup>

**Justification of Landmark beliefs**

Central to the Landmarkers' doctrine of Baptist Church exclusivism was the formulation of an unbroken line of Baptist Church succession from the time of Christ to the present. Graves held that the doctrine of an unbroken succession of Baptist churches was necessary in order to identify the true church. This thought was central to the Landmark ecclesiology. Baptist succession finds continuity not in a chain of apostolic succession but in a continuity of organization. In the words of Graves,

Christ, in the very 'days of John the Baptist,' did establish a visible kingdom on earth ... if his *kingdom* has stood unchanged, and will to the end, he must always have had true and uncorrupted churches, since his kingdom can not exist without true churches.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, for Graves the definition of true churches was Baptist Churches and his mission was to establish the "Old Landmarks" which he interpreted to mean "those principles which all true Baptists, in all ages, have professed to believe."<sup>22</sup>

Religious periodicals were one of the primary shapers of religious belief in the nineteenth century. *The Tennessee Baptist* and later *The Baptist*, owned and edited by Graves, were organs for the propagation of theological views, historical theology, church polity, promotion of slavery, and justification of slavery and racial prejudice, and attacks against all who disagreed. Graves believed such was "an *imperative* and *all-important* Christian duty."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> J.R. Graves, *Old Landmarkism: What Is It?*, 122–123. (emphasis in original)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>23</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 10 September 1853. (emphasis in original) The Tennessee Baptist was said to have the "largest circulation of any Baptist paper in the world." Source: (William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia, PA: L.H. Everts, 1881). Both Cathcart and Albert Wardin (*Tennessee Baptists* (Brentwood, TN: Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, 1999), 163.) give circulation figures for 1860 of 13,000 subscribers. Graves, however, cites a circulation of "almost 15,000." (*The Tennessee Baptist*, 7 January 1860).

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### A new look at the history of Landmarkism and slavery

A number of the works on Landmarkism and Graves, when treating the subject of the Civil War (1861–1865) and slavery, reflect a general opinion like that expressed by O.L. Hailey (Graves' son-in-law), "Dr. Graves himself had no part in the political and sectional excitement [leading up to the war]." <sup>24</sup> These writers, echoing the sentiments expressed by Hailey, would have us to believe that the great polemicist, Graves, remained silent while denominations split asunder over the issue of slavery and the pulpits and denominational papers of the nation thundered sermons and biblical exegesis to support their side and condemn the other. It should be noted that for the greater part of 1858, 1859, and part of 1860 Graves was preoccupied with his own trial at First Baptist Church, Nashville, his counter-attacks upon R.B.C. Howell, and his bold move to take over the Southern Baptist Convention. There is ample evidence, however, that prior to and after the Howell affair Graves was anything but silent on the issue of slavery, and that issue eventually sent his friend and confidante Pendleton north while Graves remained true to the southern states that seceded from the union.

As early as 1853 (eight years after the Southern Baptist Convention was born and the defining issue in that birth was the slavery question) in letter thirteen to Bishop Soule of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Graves digressed into a discussion on slavery. It is very telling. He began by asserting that all men are created equal but adds:

Had there been no sin there would have been no slavery – God himself instituted slavery as a *punishment* upon the descendants of Ham ... When God removes the curse from Ham, which will not be until every curse is abolished, the slavery of his race will cease, and not until then. <sup>25</sup>

His own exegesis of Scripture convinced him that although slavery was not the original condition of man, just as subjection to death was not his original state, it was the present state of the descendants of Ham and was such by God's decree and would remain so. This was very much in line with the rhetoric coming from the pulpits of the south in the lead-up to the war.

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<sup>24</sup> Hailey, J.R. *Graves*, 91. James E. Tull in *A History of Southern Baptist Landmarkism in the Light of Historical Baptist Ecclesiology* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1980) and *High-Church Baptists in the South*, gives hardly any notice to Graves' pre-war editorials and the role of *The Tennessee Baptist* in stirring Baptist emotions before the war. T.A. Patterson in "The Theology of J.R. Graves" (Th.D. diss. Southwest Baptist Theological seminary, May, 1944) gives more information than most regarding Graves' activities during the war but again makes little mention of the passionate rhetoric he put forth defending slavery and castigating the Northern politicians, churches, and pastors.

<sup>25</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 20 August 1853. (emphasis in original).

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In order to verify Graves' and the Landmarkers' position in general on the issue of slavery, one only has to look to the pages of *The Tennessee Baptist* and *The Baptist* both before and even after the war was over and the slaves had been freed. The editor of these papers did as much to promote the justice of the South's cause and the undesired consequences of the North's victory and the emancipation of the slaves as he did for Landmarkism and the Baptist cause.

In 1852, *The Tennessee Baptist* reprinted an article from the *Religious Herald* which advocated the preaching and teaching of the Scripture to one's slaves because "by Christianising our slave population they will perform their duties more faithfully; for Christ ordered his servant believers to serve and obey their masters".<sup>26</sup> As early as 1856, Graves had urged the secession of the southern states unless the constitution was enforced in protecting the rights of all. That would include the rights of slaveholders who Graves said "would not give up their property without a struggle."<sup>27</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* carried the following comments in an editorial in September 1858:

From the beginning, abolitionism was based upon a misconception of the physical and moral constitution of the negro ... It was everywhere seen, and universally acknowledged that the moral and physical energies of the negro were best developed in the condition of slavery ... The subordination of the negro in the relations of society is the result of that inferiority of endowment ... It had been already shown that slavery was not absolutely evil, in the sight either of reason or Scripture."<sup>28</sup>

In the aftermath of the Harpers Ferry Raid<sup>29</sup> in 1859 the editorial page of *The Tennessee Baptist* carried an article condemning the Northern fanatics who carried out the insurrection. The lesson to be learned from this blood that was

<sup>26</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 3 January 1852.

<sup>27</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 25 October 1856.

<sup>28</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 11 September 1858.

<sup>29</sup> Harpers Ferry was the site of a federal arsenal and John Brown, a radical abolitionist planned to capture the arsenal, arm local slaves, and lead an insurrection which would start a liberation movement among Negro slaves. Brown captured the arsenal on October 16, 1859 but his plans fell apart when the slaves failed to join in the rebellion and authorities in Washington, D.C. sent a force of marines led by Colonel Robert E. Lee to quell the rebellion. Brown and his men killed a few of the townspeople of Harpers Ferry including the mayor. The local citizenry joined in the attack on Brown. Ironically, the first casualty in the raid was a Negro baggage handler who was shot and killed after confronting the raiders. Brown was tried and convicted of treason and hanged. On the day of his execution church bells rang in many places and some like Emerson and Thoreau joined many others in praising Brown. For more details see David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis 1848-1861* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1976), 378-384, and Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1968).

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shed, according to the editorial, was: "The abolition *mad men* of the North have learned a lesson not to be forgotten; *the slaves are faithful to their masters*." The defence of slavery as an institution was again adamantly set forth. The fact that slavery was a Southern institution as opposed to a mere legality as it was in the North was reiterated. "Our institutions are peculiar to us. We believe in them. It is our *right* to do so."<sup>30</sup>

With the presidential election of 1860 looming, *The Tennessee Baptist* took a strong editorial stand against the Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln. The reason, as one editorial said, was because his "right hand is against the institutions of the South".<sup>31</sup> However, after Lincoln was elected and passions were running high, JM. Pendleton penned an editorial that was contrary to the views that had been consistently expressed by the paper of which he was an assistant editor. The variance at which this placed Pendleton with Graves, the other Landmarkers, and the readership of the paper was great and bears a lengthy excerpt from his editorial.

I regret most profoundly what I learn from various sources is going on in the South. Our citizens are surely acting without reflection. They are condemning the President elect before his inauguration ... Why not wait and see whether Mr. Lincoln faithfully performs his duty as President of the United States, all the States? ... I would have my countrymen of the South consider, what is to be gained by breaking up this United States? ... For one I am sure the Union will not be dissolved unless the God of heaven intends to chastise this nation. Dissolve the Union on account of slavery? What an absurdity! How preposterous for the men of the South to take this view! ... I beg I implore my brothers not to lend their influence to weaken the ligament that binds together the Sates of the Union and makes them . . . the great nation of the world.<sup>32</sup>

In this single appeal for unity Pendleton put himself at variance with his Landmark brethren and one has to believe his appeal to his brothers "not to lend their influence" to the cause of secession had to be directed to the influential editor of the paper in which this very article appeared, his friend, JR. Graves.

In December 1860 Graves wrote, "To maintain the rights of the South, *out of the Union*, when we can no longer, by fair and honorable measures remain *in it*, we pledge our life, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."<sup>33</sup> That

<sup>30</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 5 November 1859. (emphasis in original)

<sup>31</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 21 January 1860.

<sup>32</sup> *The Tennessee Baptist* (Nashville, TN) 24 November 1860.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

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same issue of the paper equated Graves' struggle with Howell (mentioned above) with the then current struggle between the North and the South over slavery. Of course the equation of Graves with the South was a winning strategy in the eyes of most Southern Baptists. Graves' called both the actions of the First Baptist Church and the actions of the North against the slave owners of the South a "treasonable act against the laws of Christ".<sup>34</sup>

**The enduring legacy of Landmark views of slavery**

Landmark doctrines, principles, and beliefs circulated throughout the Southern Baptist Convention for the next ten decades. However, the turbulent events of the 1960s proved to be in a different way as distracting as the Civil War had been in the 1860s. Riots, cities ablaze, and marches to protest segregation, the Vietnam War, and the draft enveloped the land. Baptist churches and the Southern Baptist Convention were not immune to these forces and like the Civil War in the last century this civil war swept many up into it. The threat of spreading communism, the sexual revolution, and the battle over civil rights consumed churches and the Convention. Although the Convention tried to take a mediating position on the most divisive issue, the question of equal rights for Negroes, the autonomy of the local church rendered such pronouncements essentially null and void.

This mediating position was described as:

mediating, paralyzed 'silence' on the race question. 'Silence' in this usage refers not to a complete failure to address the South's 'great matter.' Rather, it describes a situation in which public pronouncements, so encumbered with the need to mediate, were perceived merely as vague and vacuous platitudes.<sup>35</sup>

Illustrative of that was the mention, oddly enough at the end of an article about Billy Graham's political views in the 1960 presidential race, which said,

One of the surprises of the convention was the endorsement ... of the Christian Life Commission report urging Southern Baptists to make use of every opportunity to help Negro citizens to secure equal rights.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Michael Manis, *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict. Black and White Baptists and Civil Rights 1947-1957* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 102.

<sup>36</sup> "Graham Voices Political Opinion," *Baptist and Reflector* 126, no. 22 (2 June 1960): 3.

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It should be noted that the same issue of the *Baptist and Reflector* carried a report of the Tennessee Baptist Convention's action which "declined three pleas to act on the controversial race issue. In annual session, it turned aside three efforts to instruct Convention agencies to accept all persons regardless of race, color, or creed."<sup>37</sup> The policy which existed by way of silence was one of non-acceptance. As the article reports,

The Tennessee Baptist Convention has never adopted a policy on segregation. Currently no Negroes are enroled [sic] in its schools. Hospitals, though not admitting Negro patients give them emergency treatment. The Negro cases are later move [sic] to other hospitals.<sup>38</sup>

*At the local level*

Irrespective of the explanations and surprise offered up by the Baptist press, conditions in the churches were far more disturbing. The convictions expressed in the press concerning the inferiority of the Negro, as noted above, were the beliefs held by the majority of Southern Baptists. These assertions of the inequality of the races, the superiority of the white race, and the dangers of recognising these inferiors as equals, which had been fostered and which had festered for nearly one hundred years, were spread throughout the Southern Baptist Convention by respected papers, educators, pastors, and figures of note. This extreme racism was nowhere more evident than among the Landmarkers. The autonomy of the local church combined with the belief that Baptist churches and Baptist churches alone were the true church of Christ made it difficult if not impossible for the Southern Baptist churches to accept that they could be wrong in their declarations regarding racial inequality and inferiority. The refusal to admit they could be wrong about slavery had simply morphed one hundred years later into the same kind of denial regarding racial equality.

Several examples will serve to document that the version of events reported at the convention level in the religious press was a fanciful distortion of the facts. In 1966 the Tatnall Square Baptist Church on the campus of Mercer University in Macon, Georgia forced the pastor and two assistants to resign because they insisted that the church should accept as members people of all races. Mercer had been the subject of news stories and editorials in *The Christian Index* as the debate over the integration of the school raged throughout 1962 and 1963. The Southern Baptist Convention appointed a committee to study the issue and counsel with the University's trustees. This

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

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committee in the end “expressed the opinion that Baptists in Georgia were not yet ready for such a change in policy”.<sup>39</sup>

Ready or not the decision had to be made in 1963. Sam Oni, a Ghana Negro, applied for admission to Mercer. Oni had been converted through the efforts of Southern Baptist missionaries and one of Mercer’s missionary alumni recommended Mercer to Oni. “In April 1963, the Mercer trustees voted to admit [Oni as] the first black student to the University.”<sup>40</sup> Oni later presented himself for membership at the Tatnall Square church. The result, after a long and protracted struggle, was the dismissal of the pastor, Thomas J. Holmes, and two assistant pastors. Although there were notable exceptions who criticised the Tatnall Square Baptist Church for sending money to support missionaries to win converts to Christ who would subsequently be denied membership in their church, most of the Southern Baptist Convention was silent on the issue. It was said to be a local church matter.

Holmes voiced a poignant observation in regard to the autonomy of the local church and the power which rested in a congregation made up solely of baptised believers, as the Landmarkers would have characterised it. He said,

Baptist churches have operated for centuries under the belief that the congregation rules. In fact, Baptists have practically substituted the doctrine of congregational infallibility for the doctrine of papal infallibility.<sup>41</sup>

The Landmark doctrines of republicanism, democratic government, and local autonomy coupled with a high-church, sectarian, exclusivist mentality made change difficult and deflection of criticism easy. Holmes added,

A Baptist church ... can become the most ruthless political machine imaginable. Matters of morals and faith are then decided by the counting of noses. No single dynamic in Baptist life is in greater need of change.<sup>42</sup>

The First Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama suffered through a similar situation. Birmingham had been the scene of some of the most widely publicised and deadly struggles of the Civil Rights movement. Things exploded (figuratively) at First Baptist Church on June 27, 1970 when a Negro woman and her daughter presented themselves for membership. The daughter came on profession of faith and wanted to be baptised. This began a long and

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas J. Holmes, *Ashes for Breakfast* (Valley Forge, PA: The Judson Press, 1969), 22.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–23.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

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bitter struggle which resulted in schism and the ouster of the pastor Herbert Gilmore. Because of Birmingham's history the struggle received much national news coverage making the pages of *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The Christian Century*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps one of the most insightful comments on the whole situation was offered by federal judge HH. Grooms, Sr. in addressing a church conference there in September, 1970. In relating his comments to Matthew 23:15 he said,

It has been suggested that in lieu of taking black people in, we increase our Gifts to foreign missions ... The last version that I have read on this [woe] reads this way: 'You lock the doors of the Kingdom of Heaven in men's faces, yet you sail the seas and cross whole countries to win one convert.'<sup>44</sup>

Judge Grooms' address had no noticeable impact on the situation at the First Baptist Church. The church split, the pastor was removed and the church continued to have no Negro members. It is more than a little dichotomous that the fallback position of the Southern Baptist Convention continued to be its commitment to foreign missions and taking the Gospel to all people – all people except the people in their own community of a different colour.

The odd thing about the Birmingham situation is the fact that it came almost two years after the adoption of a very clear statement by the Southern Baptist Convention regarding their shortfalls in the area of race relations. This followed a summer of riots and civil unrest. The document was entitled, "A Statement Concerning the Crisis in Our Nation." It said in part,

we have come far short of our privilege in Christian brotherhood ... [we commit to] personally accept every Christian as a brother ... and welcome to the fellowship of faith and worship every person irrespective of race or class.<sup>45</sup>

What this statement ignored was the powerful influence of the sectarian Baptist stance which was only further entrenched by the great loss of life, pride, and material well-being brought on by the Civil War and its aftermath as outlined above. The decades of racism, high-church Baptist attitudes, and a

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<sup>43</sup> See J. Herbert Gilmore, Jr., *They Chose to Live, The Racial Agony of an American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972) for the history of these events in the First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama.

<sup>44</sup> Gilmore, *They Chose to Live*, 190.

<sup>45</sup> *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention Nineteen Hundred and Sixty-Eight, One Hundred Eleventh Session, One Hundred Twenty-Third Year, Houston, Texas, June 4-7, 1968* (Nashville, TN: Executive Committee Southern Baptist Convention, 1968), 67-69.

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disdain for other Christians was not going to be erased by a pronouncement from the annual convention.

*Other voices*

Luther Copeland makes the case that most of the instances in which the Southern Baptists have wandered from the truth of Scripture throughout their history can be traced back to the original sin of defending slavery, the thing that precipitated their formation as a separate denomination although certain revisions of history today seek to deny that as the formative cause.<sup>46</sup>

Copeland relates the highly sectarian attitudes of Southern Baptists, which he calls “denominational conceit or arrogance”, directly to the Landmark traditions which were still part and parcel of the Southern Baptist claim of distinctiveness. He says,

Landmarkism continued to have a powerful influence upon Southern Baptists and was not only strongly sectarian but also fiercely polemical, engaging in continuous warfare with other denominations ... It occasioned acrimonious controversy within the ranks of Southern Baptists as well.<sup>47</sup>

At the root of this acrimony was the claim that only Southern Baptist churches are New Testament churches. This coupled with the constant tirade of criticism against other denominations produced an attitude of superiority and contempt for other denominations as clear as what had been set forth in the writings of Graves, et. al. As Copeland wrote, “We Southern Baptists, under Landmark influence, did not hesitate to assert that we had sole possession of the truth or at least had more truth than any other denominational body.”<sup>48</sup>

Copeland makes the case that the Southern Baptist air of supremacy was closely tied to the alleged superiority and purity of many white Southerners. He quotes Ben Bridges, executive secretary of the Arkansas Baptist Convention, who said,

We believe our theology, our doctrines ... are complete within themselves ... our utter reliance upon the pure word of God has preserved us from error and reserved to us a purer faith than that of any other people under heaven.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See E. Luther Copeland, *The Southern Baptist Convention and the Judgment of History, The Taint of an Original Sin* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> Copeland, *The Southern Baptist Convention and the Judgment of History*, 86.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 88.

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After numerous quotes from various Southern Baptist sources regarding the supremacy and superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race Copeland concluded, "Landmarkism ... allied itself with Southern sectionalism and racism to produce exaggerated notions of Southern Baptist superiority."<sup>50</sup>

Andrew Manis called "such a perspective the quintessential religious legitimization, and its use by Southern clergy continued into the Second Reconstruction"<sup>51</sup> (Second Reconstruction refers to the civil rights battles of the mid-twentieth century). Manis made the same point made above, i.e., that in the lead up to the Civil War both sides claimed God's divine sanction of their position and vigorously defended their position from Scripture. He said in the religious wars of the civil rights movement "both groups ... found divine sanction for their views and actions".<sup>52</sup>

Manis cited the example of Carey Daniel, pastor of First Baptist Church, West Dallas, Texas.<sup>53</sup> Daniel preached a sermon that harkened back to the editorial affirmations of the nineteenth century Landmark press which tied the biblical basis of segregation to the division of Noah's sons after the flood and the Curse of Ham. Daniel's sermon was heralded by many in the press who supported segregation and is still one of the quintessential examples of Southern Baptist sectarian superiority and the use of Scripture to defend such positions.<sup>54</sup> In essence Daniel had not deviated from the post-Civil War Landmark position on the place of the Negro in American society. Manis asserted that the Civil War never really ended but was now being waged on the "civil religious front as well".<sup>55</sup> The leaders of the Southern whites in this war were the Southern Baptist Convention. Manis, as quoted above, referred to the actions of the convention as vague platitudes.<sup>56</sup> On that same subject, Ellen Rosenberg noted,

By the late 1960s, the topic that was convulsing the entire region was the subject of so much compromise at the national [Convention] that the resolutions sounded nearly incoherent and incomprehensible.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>51</sup> Manis, *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict*, 91.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel was the brother of Texas Democratic Senator Price Daniel who was also a candidate for governor.

<sup>54</sup> Daniel circulated a petition of pastors who opposed integration in the pages of the *Dallas Morning News*, Sunday, 18 May, 1958. In addition to Manis, others from *Time* 5 November 1956 to Jane Dailey, *Journal of American History*, 91, no. 1, 2004 have made reference to Daniel's comments.

<sup>55</sup> Manis, *Southern Civil Religions in Conflict*, 99.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>57</sup> Ellen M. Rosenberg, "The Southern Baptist Response to the Newest South," in Nancy Ammerman, ed., *Southern Baptists Observed, Multiple Perspectives on a Changing Denomination* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 149.

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*The clear rhetoric and influence of Landmarkism*

If the expressions at the national level were vague, the local expressions against integration and recognition of blacks were anything but incoherent. A letter from Selsus E. Tull to the editor of the *Arkansas Baptist* who had expressed a favourable opinion regarding integration is a prime example. Tull accused the editor of using his position to try to defeat the convictions of the Baptists of Arkansas who were against integration (ninety-five percent of Arkansas Baptists according to him). Tull suggested to the editor that there were two honourable choices open to him:

one is to apologize to the Baptists of Arkansas for using their paper in your attempt to put over your views in favor of integration; and the other is to resign and take your fight for mongrelization to other fields.<sup>58</sup>

Tull was a long-time Southern Baptist pastor and leader who was solidly Landmark in his ecclesiology. He said, "I assert the first Baptist church was organized by Jesus Christ." He believed Baptist doctrine had been preserved through all ages. "Throughout the Christian ages, the pure Baptist teaching has survived." Then he added, "[Any] church which cannot bear this historical test . . . can never claim to be 'The Bride of Christ.'"<sup>59</sup> Tull would have been in step both ecclesiologically and racially with the Landmarkers of one hundred years earlier.

As had been the case in the days of the Landmark ascendancy the seminaries were targeted for lack of compliance to the Southern Baptist mandate. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been invited to speak at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (King gave the Julius B. Gay Lecture at the seminary on April 19, 1961.). Taylor Branch said that King's name was so sensitive that,

the white Southern Baptist Convention forced its seminary to apologize for allowing King to discuss religion on the Louisville campus. Within the church, this simple invitation was a racial and theological heresy, such that churches across the South rescinded their regular donations to the seminary.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Selsus E. Tull to Erwin L. McDonald 21 February 1959. Transcript in hand of Erwin L. McDonald Papers Collection, University of Central Arkansas Archives and Special Collections, Fayetteville, AR.

<sup>59</sup> Selsus E. Tull, "Denominationalism Put to the Test," address by S.E. Tull to Murray Bible Conference (Murray, KY: published by the author, 1912), 16-17.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor E. Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 488. Taylor Branch is an American known for his

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*A great contrast*

It is clear that the vacuous pronouncements coming from the Convention regarding civil rights masked the true sentiments of a very large number of Southern Baptists. As shown above the attacks against Herbert Gilmore at First Baptist Church in Birmingham and Thomas Holmes at Tatnall Square Baptist Church in Macon were retribution against pastors who tried to open the doors of the church to all people – the very thing many of the resolutions of the Southern Baptist Convention proclaimed. The roots of such retribution can be found in Landmarkism and the exclusivist, sectarian, high-church attitudes associated with being the only true church in the minds of many Southern Baptists.

**Conclusion**

Landmarkism does not have an exclusive claim on racial prejudice and bigotry but the influence of those with Landmark beliefs within the Southern Baptist Convention left an indelible mark on Southern Baptists. The perpetuation of the white Southern Baptist supremacy, which was actually rooted in Baptist church supremacy, sharply polarised the civil rights struggles in the South one hundred years after the bloodiest war ever fought by Americans supposedly settled the issue. The long history of the church has shown, however, that war, imprisonment, and torture cannot trump the deeply held beliefs inculcated through religious instruction. The teacher, the preacher, and even the religious press can and do shape beliefs and attitudes which endure, even when they are grounded in error.

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