

Milligan's Passivity During the Civil Rights Movement:
Its Theological Roots and the Hopeful Movement
Toward an Active Approach to Social Justice

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COMP 211 - Inquiring Minds: Foundational Analytical Composition

How Should Christians respond to injustice?

- ❖ Racial and Social justice... how should Christians respond?
- ❖ Jemar Tisby, in *The Color of Compromise*:
 - "[Christians] chose comfort over constructive conflict and in so doing created and maintained a status quo of injustice" (15).
 - "the failure of Christians to decisively oppose racism provided fertile soil for the seeds of hatred to grow" (15).
 - "There can be no repentance without confession. And there can be no confession without truth" (15).
- ❖ Christians should move forward in truth and humble confession in order to reject further complicity toward racism



The Color of Compromise

"Christian Education - the Hope of the World"

- ❖ Lives up to this motto... students leave transformed and prepared
- ❖ Still, the school is affected by the context in which it exists
 - Christian context during Civil Rights era
 - Tenets of the Stone-Campbell movement
- ❖ Initial approach: neither a stark opposition nor a staunch agent of change
 - Instead, followed in footsteps of Alexander Campbell

Thesis: An analysis of Milligan's response and its contextual catalysts can help us begin to understand why silence and inaction exist among the tradition of Christianity; this honest confession is integral in the work of moving forward in love and justice.

Progression of Paper

- A. The Broader Context: the Civil Rights Movement, Billy Graham, and Evangelicalism
- B. Milligan's Response
- C. The Stone-Campbell Movement, its founders' theology, and their approach to slavery
 - a. Alexander Campbell's focus on Unity and the Bible
 - b. Barton Stone's apocalyptic perspective (Kingdom of Heaven, here and now)
- D. Moving Forward

The Broader Context:



The Civil Rights Movement &
Evangelicalism

The Civil Rights Movement

- ❖ 1950s & 60s
- ❖ *Brown v. Board of Education* - 1954
 - a tangible starting point
- ❖ People began protesting injustice
- ❖ Sense of success from President Lyndon B. Johnson
 - Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968

Christianity's Response

- ❖ Martin Luther King Jr.
 - A Christian leader representing a particular expression of Christianity
- ❖ Billy Graham and the expression of Christianity he represented
- ❖ Took down dividing ropes in 1953
- ❖ Tisby gives credit for that, but calls out a failure to proactively speak out for change:
 - He "avoided scheduling crusades in the South for a period" after the *Brown v. Board* decision. (134)
 - "He assiduously avoided any countercultural stances that would have alienated his largely white audience and his supporters" (134).
- ❖ The avoidance of controversial viewpoints for the sake of diplomacy

Milligan's Response

According to *The Stampede*

The Stampede

- ❖ Gives snapshots of perspectives and response
- ❖ Student perspectives varied
- ❖ Also includes the perspective of staff at the time



Interview with Dr. C. Robert Wetzel

- ❖ Professor at the time, later became an administrator
 - Still appreciated today by professors and former students
- ❖ Potential concerns
- ❖ Dr. Wetzel's thoughtful responses & consistent support for integration
- ❖ Answers to pointed questions regarding racism and integration
 - "Enlightened view" of the campus
 - "If by extreme racial prejudice, you mean overt actions such as we read about in the papers, no, I haven't. If you mean a prejudice that prevents racial dialogue, very definitely yes."
 - "I would hope that meaningful dialogue could continue because, no matter how much we differ from each other, this is the kind of problem that needs to be the subject of continuing dialogue."
 - "Milligan has always been known for its friendliness and its courtesy, and I think it will continue to be that way."

"Why has Milligan College never been integrated?"

- ❖ Dr. Wetzel: "Let me give some historical perspective."
 - "we don't have a large Negro membership in the Christian churches"
 - He thought that ETSU might be more attractive to black students at the time
- ❖ End of answer: "Then I'm confident that to some degree there has been a time in the history of Milligan College when it was thought that for expeditious reasons it would be better to maintain the status quo."
- ❖ Did not elaborate on what he meant by "expeditious reasons"

One possibility: Financial contributors

"To a certain degree whatever stand we take on any kind of social question is going to receive criticism. It is a matter of judging the ultimate influence of that criticism: whether it is a matter of following an expediency or whether it is a matter of standing on moral principle. I personally believe that by far the greater percentage of our church people have an enlightened view about this matter. I don't think that our location is a serious factor. East Tennessee State University has had Negro students in it for years, and really we're coming to this so late in the game that the problem has been pretty well settled for us in other circles."

- ❖ Expediency vs. moral principle
 - Formerly for "expeditious reasons"
- ❖ "pretty well settled for us in other circles"
- ❖ Going along with the status quo

George Balser's Letter to the Editor

"The choice of speakers has reflected an extremely biased point of view, not permitting students to hear a greater number of those representing points of view other than conservative Christianity. We have been exposed to Christian speakers condoning our war effort, expressing ultra-conservative thoughts concerning the Negro civil rights movement, and still others who strongly oppose student activism. Yet, we have not heard one Christian leader speak of pacification, love, or peace."

- ❖ Calls for a more balanced presentation of Christian perspectives
- ❖ Shows a view that Milligan had not been showing students examples of Christians with activist mindsets

Interview with Dr. Dennison

- ❖ Addressed Balser's Letter to the Editor in the next month's issue
- ❖ Dr. Dennison:
 - They had tried to make it as varied as possible
 - Were making efforts to include more diverse opinions
- ❖ Balser: a tired student not wanting to go to chapel?
- ❖ But to dismiss him would be to ignore the perspective of a Milligan student saying: "Yet, we have not heard one Christian leader speak of pacification, love, or peace."
- ❖ If grounded, these claims, reveal a large oversight at an important time
- ❖ Dennison avoided any acknowledgement or confession

Milligan's Good Action

- ❖ Good examples in several articles from late 60s
 - Many other people who did not have articles written about them
- ❖ Dr. Wetzel's honest assessment
- ❖ Coming change reported by Dr. Dennison
- ❖ Diversified perspectives including Dr. James Hefley in the following year

Dr. Hefley's opening convocation speech

- ❖ An audience of around 800 people at the 1969-1970 formal Fall Convocation
- ❖ Opened with: "I challenge you to wake up to your mad, mad world."
- ❖ *The Stampede* says he called out Christianity for its lack of zeal and "urged, then, that Christians be more radical for their cause, instead of being identified with "the status quo of live-and-let-live... philosophy."
- ❖ This shows Milligan beginning to present diversified perspectives

Still, not a forerunner for integration

- ❖ Milligan began to exhibit action towards justice
- ❖ They were not, however, forerunners in the conversation for civil rights
- ❖ *Brown v. Board of Education* was passed in 1954
- ❖ The first black student enrolled at Milligan in 1968
- ❖ 15 years
- ❖ They could have led the charge, but they did not.
- ❖ Why?

The Stone-Campbell Movement

& the Theology of its Founders

The Stone-Campbell Movement & Milligan

- ❖ Non-denominational movement formed in the 19th century
- ❖ Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell led separate movements that combined
- ❖ Milligan's website states:
 - Milligan has "maintained an active relationship with the nondenominational Christian Churches. Committed to the restoration of New Testament Christianity and the unity of all believers, these congregations are a dynamic and growing fellowship."
- ❖ "restoration of New Testament Christianity" and "the unity of all believers"
- ❖ These two tenets have continued to inform the movement's members

NT Christianity & Unity in Alexander Campbell's Theology

Richard T. Hughes in *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America*:

"To understand Campbell at this point, we must assess his theological agenda in three respects."

- 1) Reading of scripture - a scientific manual of sorts
- 2) Personal conversion and "obedience to 'first principles' - faith, repentance, confession, and immersion"
- 3) Focus on particular parts of scripture - beginning with Acts

Application to Slavery Argument

Brian Pendleton: "Under the reforming mandate of maintaining and promoting unity within the church, Campbell was able to use his emphasis upon the priority of the biblical witness to forge a distinction between faith... and opinion... This distinction, which allowed Disciples to disagree on slavery, allowed Campbell to articulate a kind of mediating position between the abolitionists and pro-slavery parties."

- 1) Bible as a scientific manual - lack of prohibition of slavery in the Bible means "they were not suitable issues for debate in the larger Christian community."
- 2) Large focus on individual conversion left little time for attention to social justice
- 3) Focus on early Church - did not give attention to OT prophets or Gospels

Barton Stone's response to slavery

- ❖ Denounced slavery and racism among the Church.
- ❖ Hughes quotes the autobiography of Joseph Thomas:
 - "the christians of these parts *abhor* the idea of *slavery*, and some of them have almost tho't that they who hold to slavery cannot be christian."
- ❖ Slavery was a major problematic for Christians in Stone's movement
- ❖ What about Stone's theology led to this?

Stone's Apocalyptic Perspective

- ❖ "Apocalyptic" - not end time speculation
 - Instead, "signifies an outlook that led Stone and many of his followers to act as though the final rule of the kingdom of God were present in the here and now."
- ❖ Applied the rule of God to all matters of life... religious, moral, social, etc.
- ❖ Ownership of slaves, pursuit of wealth, and self-interest were deemed as not in line with the kingdom of God
- ❖ Believed the kingdom of God was present, allowed that to inform how they lived their lives

Convergence of Movements

- ❖ Stone and Campbell joined forces
- ❖ Campbell's non-activistic theology affected Stone's justice-oriented approach
- ❖ Together, the movement began to consider slavery as a social problem
 - Unrelated to the faith of Christians and therefore not their responsibility
- ❖ Effect on Stone-Campbell Christians' response to the Civil Rights Movement, including Milligan

Moving Forward

Summary of Milligan's response

- ❖ Continued the tradition of maintaining the status quo
- ❖ Could have advocated for racial justice as Barton Stone did
- ❖ Eventual participation in honest reflection and institutional change
- ❖ But largely a reaction to the shifting status quo
- ❖ Instead of a proactive initiative to find truth and justice for the oppressed that

Final Words

"Wake up to your world. Keep asking the right questions that prick and pain a callous church. Love those who don't understand your motives. Help resurrect the church from its cultural hangups and indifference to the suffering millions who groan in spiritual darkness. Put your life where your mouth is and do something."

May we heed these words as we prick and love and resurrect and act. May we follow in the footsteps of Dr. C. Robert Wetzel as we honestly assess our past and humbly admit when we have come up short. May we look to Barton Stone as a beacon for how we might live lives that profess, here and now, the Kingdom of Heaven.

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