Most Sunday mornings from June 1963 through April 1964, as white Christians flocked to church in Jackson, Mississippi, they met chaos. Amidst the buzz of a police force with dogs, billy clubs, and walkie talkies, small groups of curiosity seekers and angry layfolk loitered under church porticos; sometimes a complement of local and national press representatives stood by, too. All awaited the arrival of interracial groups of civil rights activists who sought entry to these sanctuaries but endured repeated rejection from the majority of them. Sometimes members of a “color guard” formed physical barricades, and police often arrested the would-be worshippers. Special gall issued from this spectacle on Easter Sunday 1964, when Galloway Memorial Methodist Church rebuffed Bishop Charles Golden, a black leader of its own denomination. Almost simultaneously with this theater in Jackson, ninety miles to the southeast in Hattiesburg, scores of white ministers in clerical collars picketed on behalf of black citizens seeking the right to vote. Police arrested a few of the clerics, who later celebrated communion in their jail cells using coffee and county-issued biscuits as the elements. Local white religious leaders offered neither physical nor moral support to their northern coreligionists who came to challenge Mississippi’s racial hierarchy; instead they publicly castigated them for “prostituting the church to political purposes.” Meanwhile, in Canton, white congregations almost unanimously pledged to spurn civil rights workers—white or black—who flooded the town. While three white activists worshipped at the local Presbyterian church, someone poured sugar in the oil reservoir of their car. Two others who tried to visit First Methodist encountered a more brutal unwelcome. After ushers turned them away, thugs pursued and beat them.

INTRODUCTION

History, White Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement
The above vignettes suggest religion’s significance in the struggle against black equality, the central theme of this book. This story follows Mississippi’s three most numerically and historically significant white Protestant faith communities at ground-zero of the social revolution that rocked America. As a religious history of white Southern Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians in the civil rights era, it examines these evangelicals’ two great enthusiasms—ardent devotion to the Christian gospel and equal zeal for what can only be described as white supremacy—and explains how these commitments interacted with one another.

The black freedom struggle deeply engaged white evangelicals, and profound concern about the prospect of racial equality saturated their religious lives. Religious literature, deacons’ meetings, Bible classes, Sunday school conversations, and even worship services pulsed with fear about integration and its consequences. No other issue so occupied the religious attention of white Mississippians nor so worried church leaders, and nothing elicited greater religious energy or creativity. Turmoil often rode into Mississippi’s faith communities on the waves of civil rights events, but sometimes whites’ own deep fears of integration manufactured civil rights crises without an activist in sight.

Fixated on the potential advent of black equality, white Christians joined the fight to preserve white power and privilege in all its forms. Having accepted both evangelicalism and white supremacy as unassailable truths for years, these Mississippians generally regarded as patently absurd the notion that God frowned on their racial arrangements; the sudden appearance of segregation in some syllabus of sins jolted their sensibilities. In their religious world, racial integration represented a heinous moral evil—and they fought it as if against the devil himself. White Mississippians’ fierce and tenacious defense of their segregated society relied heavily on religious ideas and frames of reference. Their segregationist polemics employed biblical apologetics, but religion figured in the defense of the racial hierarchy in other far more significant ways, including the overt sanctification of a political philosophy that underpinned segregation. And evangelicals went well beyond rhetoric. They marshaled the power of the state, warred against their own denominations, caucused and organized, and ejected black worshippers from their sanctuaries.

Yet, for all white Mississippi evangelicals’ devotion to segregation, faith motivated some moderates to reevaluate do-or-die commitments
to the racial hierarchy. These outliers seldom championed integration outright, but they contributed important support for free speech and basic decency as both became endangered. While moderates, their denominational leaders, and black activists competed against segregationists, Mississippi’s once-placid religious communities transmogrified into civil rights battlegrounds. Many believers passed the civil rights years conflicted and confused, and debates over the meanings of spiritual commitments wracked local congregations. As local leaders feared that the centrifuge of racial turmoil would hurl their parishioners in a thousand directions, Mississippi religious life devolved into a tortured, splintered, and ravaged affair. Certainly, the moral clarity about human equality that seems so compelling in retrospect often eluded the white Christians who filled Mississippi sanctuaries.

At the time and since, many Americans have wondered how a society so vociferously Christian could also fight so tenaciously to preserve an oppressive racial system. But few of the evangelicals who people this story believed that the Gospel required them to dismantle segregation; thus they did not generally believe that they embodied some great paradox. The events described here unfolded in an intellectual universe whose inhabitants understood the Christian faith and its implications quite differently from the meanings today’s believers give it. This book depicts that foreign landscape and re-creates white Americans’ dialogue about the implications of faith for racial justice. Focused on a time when the outcome of that debate remained undecided, this study examines almost exclusively the side of the conversation that lost.

Mississippi Praying and the Historians

Though white religion played an important role in the fight against racial equality, many volumes in the recent rich outpouring on massive resistance include religion only incidentally in the narrative, if at all, and only a few essays comprise the periodical treatments on the topic. Important exceptions to this trend include some literature that appreciates religion’s centrality to politics, but few such works aim to tell an essentially religious story or to grapple with the relationship between white supremacy and white religion. In this book, on the other hand, questions of religion drive the analysis. Drawing significantly on insights from American religious
history, the book takes the experiences of religious individuals, leaders, congregations, and faith communities as the basis of the narrative.

Some historians have examined white religion’s encounter with black equality through the activities of the major denominations. While such studies remain exceedingly useful, institutional histories often tell us little about the people who fill the pews—their experiences, ideas, and activities. A story centered in local religious communities offers quite a different perspective. At the local level, denominational identity commonly melted into a more general, popular southern Protestantism, and local culture, the pastor, and the Bible class teacher wielded great influence. Even more central to this story, religious folk often famously contravene their leaders and institutional bodies. Early on in Mississippi and eventually in many other places as well, this very tension rose to nearly intolerable levels over issues of black equality, and constant haranguing against denominational leaders constituted a central feature of religious life during the civil rights years. Intense conflict between layfolk and national religious leaders revealed the strength of religious commitments to segregation and white supremacy—commitments that often appear weak and muted in denominational histories.

As frequently happens, misconceptions and inaccuracies have moved in to fill the gaps in our knowledge. These misapprehensions have generally leaned in two directions. On the one hand, since local white congregations and people of faith fail to appear in many civil rights narratives, the assumption thrives that white religion passed the civil rights years as a silent, passive, or unimportant player. The language of white evangelicals, who often belied their own ardor for white supremacy by describing the question of segregation as political and therefore outside the sphere of appropriate Christian concerns, indeed bolsters this impression. By their criticisms of politically outspoken ministers and church leaders, by the silence about black suffering that billowed from their most prestigious sanctuaries, and by their emphasis on the non-political mission of evangelism, Southern Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians often pretended simply to have neither time nor concern for the cause of racial equality. Contemporary onlookers noted, and sometimes critiqued, this apparent insouciance. Among them, Martin Luther King, Jr., in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, famously expressed his deep disillusionment with southern white Christians and their failure to join the struggle
for black equality: “In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, ‘Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern.’” Scholars—at the time and since—have often actively contended for or worked with the same notion that local white congregations, ministers, and people of faith fairly yawned with disinterest as black Americans waged a death-defying struggle for their full humanity. In his well-known 1966 social critique, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, the historian Samuel S. Hill, Jr., argued that southern Christianity had stuck its head in the other-worldly sands of personal salvation and evangelism, ignoring the swelling tide of social change. More recently, David L. Chappell’s *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* characterizes white religious support for segregation as “weak,” as if white Mississippi Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians really cared little about preserving the institution.

Frustrated that their common faith did not compel white Protestant solidarity with the cause of racial justice, King and Hill chided southern Christians for indifference to the civil rights movement. But white evangelicals in Mississippi and many other locales could no more ignore the challenge to white supremacy than those at the epicenter of an earthquake can ignore the pitching and roiling of the ground around them. These Christians did not pass the civil rights years floating beatifically on clouds of cool detachment; such a response, as the segregated structures of southern life came crashing down around them, hardly seems plausible. Ever so disappointed in their evangelical brethren, King and Hill generously read their silence as apathy or preoccupation. But the façade of silence cloaked a truth far more revealing: not only did white Christians fail to fight for black equality, they often labored mightily against it.

A second and related distortion in the literature focuses on the biblical defense of segregation and too flatly equates southern religious resistance to integration with these race-based exegetics. Mississippians did indeed offer scriptural defenses for preserving their racial hierarchy, citing the story of Noah’s curse on the descendants of his son, Ham, as a favorite proof text. Mississippians composed such polemics and delivered them in print, from pulpits, and on the radio; they also circulated
a wide variety of similar texts by other southerners. However, though their influence and the assumptions that underpinned them appear everywhere, only a relatively small number of these texts remain extant. Scholars who look for religious commitments to segregation only in these biblical defenses underestimate the strength of evangelicals’ commitment to the institution. Christians fought for white supremacy in ways that extended beyond simply preaching the biblical case for it. Furthermore, overemphasizing the role of these exegetics pins the defense of segregation on a few unsophisticated extremists, rather than demonstrating the racial hierarchy’s powerful but often subtle articulation by more polished religious leaders and prominent laymen. Some of the state’s most prestigious ministers and many devoutly segregationist laymen never deployed such arguments, though these individuals played important roles in resisting black equality.

The first generation of scholars to examine white religion’s response to the civil rights challenge wrote in the midst of the revolution itself, hoping to prod their coreligionists to confront blacks’ demands more proactively. Believing that a mandate for human equality inhered in the Christian Gospel, this cohort framed southern evangelicalism’s failure in the arena of race relations as a problem of “cultural captivity.” In this formulation, something foreign had trapped the church; southern Christianity needed but to wrest its soul from enslavement to southern racial mores and recover its true redemptive essence. Though this group of scholars contributed significantly to studies in the field of southern religion, this book challenges the framework of cultural captivity on several grounds and offers an essentially different conception of southern religion’s role in creating and sustaining racial oppression.

Perhaps most problematically, the idea of cultural captivity erects a false distinction between religion and culture by supposing that religion somehow stands apart from culture as either adversary or accomplice. Far more than the cultural captivity framework suggests, religion develops with, aids, and bolsters the political, economic, and social conditions around it. Southern religion did not just guiltily “come along” with segregation in a bad and ugly business; rather, it served actively in the phalanx of institutions by which white domination perpetuated itself.

Not only does the notion of cultural captivity propose a false distinction between people’s religious and ostensibly non-religious
worlds; it also perhaps unintentionally endows churchfolk with an entirely implausible passivity. No southern cultural terrorists drugged the church with a stupefying elixir to co-opt its acquiescence in racial domination. Such a depiction ignores the active role the church played in creating and sustaining the system of oppression. As this volume shows, the proactive defenders of segregation who defied the Supreme Court, voted for segregationist candidates, drafted and promoted anti-civil rights legislation, herded black activists into jail, and formed citizens’ groups to keep the dream of white supremacy alive did not morph into weak, mealy, other-worldly idealists upon entering their houses of worship. To the contrary, they employed the same pragmatic calculation and worked with the same enthusiasm for white supremacy inside the sanctuary as out. They cared no less about keeping their churches segregated than their schools, and they worked as diligently to control religious discourses as political ones.

Finally, the cultural captivity interpretation inappropriately excuses religion from historical contingency, treating matters of faith as constant and unchanging. Rather than receiving the commands of God as fixed tablets of stone, people make and remake their religion, and white southerners crafted a faith divinely suited for white supremacy. The historically determined and continually transforming nature of religion and religious belief illustrate themselves nowhere better than in white Americans’ changing conceptions of the demands of Christianity with regard to race relations. In twenty-first century America, evangelicals have widely come to accept that their Gospel includes a mandate for racial equality. Yet this thoroughgoing embrace causes them to forget that their rather immediate forbearers served as serious obstacles to the aspirations of black Americans because they regarded this very principle as profoundly unchristian.

White Supremacy, Religion, and Politics

This book probes the links between theology and white supremacy. The term “white supremacy” may jar a bit; the phrase conjures up militant devotion to a racist ideology, and may seem ill applied to ordinary people who go about their lives and work, never dressing up in sheets, wielding a lynch rope, or spewing racial epithets. In fact, however, this phrase
describes the American racial hierarchy more accurately and honestly than the milder “segregation,” which technically identifies only a policy of keeping whites and blacks apart. Segregation never aimed only for separation, the assertion of many of its defenders to the contrary. Instead, it calculated to advantage whites in every facet of their lives and to saddle blacks with corresponding and unyielding disadvantages.

In an important sense, a struggle for the soul of American Christianity lies at the heart of this story. The racial hierarchy required a certain theological approach—the specific understandings of salvation, morality, and biblical interpretation that dominated in the Magnolia State. Thus white evangelicals’ efforts to retain segregation included intense battles to preserve the orthodoxy of their kind of evangelical belief. Simultaneous with their efforts to thwart black equality, Mississippi’s evangelicals argued vigorously with other whites about the meaning and implications of Christianity. Disagreements over the proper response to the black freedom struggle fell along fault lines remarkably consistent with theological divides, whether among white Mississippians themselves or between them and their coreligionists outside the state. Conservative evangelicals recognized that white religious champions of black equality generally embraced an essentially different Gospel. They did not always emphasize the centrality of individual salvation or the primacy of evangelism, and they tended to construe the mission of the church far more broadly and to accept a wide range of scriptural readings—trends Mississippians despised as dangerously apostate. The fight to preserve the racial hierarchy thus included an earnest contest for the faith that had bolstered and sanctified it.

As a work of religious history, *Mississippi Praying* places these matters of faith at the center of the narrative and the analysis. Yet because religion helps a society decide and justify who shall have access to its resources, power, and privilege, this study ultimately concerns matters of politics. Mississippi evangelicals ostensibly claimed an apolitical mission; they wanted only to bring the message of salvation to all, changing society “one heart at a time.” In spite of this confessed avoidance of politics, a specific political orientation lay embedded in evangelical doctrine. The oft-repeated notions that social problems merely reflected individual problems and that social change would come only as each individual embraced the Gospel obscured the reality that the system itself needed a
good deal of saving. Contrary to evangelicals’ assertions, the conversion of every Mississippian in the state would never correct the sufferings caused by an exclusionary political system, a deficient educational system, a discriminatory economic system, and an unfair judicial system. Yet this individualistic notion of social change allowed Mississipians to decry government initiatives as ineffective and unwarranted intrusions.

A political philosophy thus inhered within evangelical theology, as it does to an extent in all theologies. Furthermore, these white Christians never avoided politics, though they professed to. Long before the religious right burst on the national scene, Mississipians mobilized against forces that undermined their values through grassroots campaigns in the churches. In the immediate post–World War II years, they formed Christian Citizens’ Leagues that worked to promote “civic righteousness.” They used their resources to promote issues important to them and to elect candidates whose values reflected their own. This activity continued seamlessly through evangelicals’ resistance to black equality, another struggle they undertook in order to preserve their wholesome Christian society. Religious leaders who claimed to be apolitical nonetheless preached philosophies of limited government that denied blacks any means for addressing grievances. The campaigns that brought evangelicals out in large numbers in the 1970s—opposition to abortion, concerns over the sexual content of television and movies, a rising divorce rate—represented still another phase in a long, unbroken stream of activity, not a new departure.10

Mississipians worked diligently in the political arena to create and maintain a Christian society, but the national religious backdrop against which they pursued this activity changed dramatically over the course of the civil rights years. Scholars interested in the rise of the religious right have recently emphasized the contested political climate of the cold war years, but this book demonstrates that evangelicals resisted black equality in a similarly fluid national religious environment. During most of the years covered by this study, no political party claimed the exclusive allegiance of religion. And though quite religiously homogenous themselves, Mississipians belonged to larger national bodies rich with theological diversity. Fundamentalists, social gospelers, ecumenists, and Christian socialists all shared membership in the same communion. Rather than basking in consensual post-war harmony,
the denominations suffered severe convulsions over the meanings of real Christianity, biblical interpretation, and their political implications. Mississippians played important roles in these contests, the most important of which concerned the movement for racial justice.

Though political activity always characterized Mississippians’ religious life, their enemies changed over time, and in the civil rights era their own national bodies joined the ranks of their worst foes. As racial turmoil in America reached a climactic moment in 1968, white Mississippians’ larger denominational worlds of the Southern Baptist Convention, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church, U.S., seemed irredeemable threats to their faith. To one degree or another, in Mississippians’ minds these denominations advanced an apostate theology, an activist social ethic, a lax biblical interpretation, and a misguided politics. Conservatives led battles to reclaim their traditions from heresies and to capture these bodies as unalloyed champions of their theological—and consequently political—perspective. Having failed to deprive the movement for black equality of its legitimacy, Mississippi evangelicals employed their well-honed organizational skills and contributed significant leadership to this struggle to save the souls of their religious traditions. Conservatives initiated a takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), eviscerating the voices that had most eagerly pressed for systemic change. Presbyterians organized a new communion, the Presbyterian Church in America, based on pristine commitments to the exclusively spiritual mission of the church. For its part, the United Methodist Church lost its most conservative members in droves. Participants in these struggles insisted—and today continue to maintain—that these massive transformations revolved exclusively around theology and had no connection to the civil rights struggle. In fact, however, the theological diversity these bellicerents sought to eliminate had characterized these denominations for years; only in the midst of racial revolution did tensions reach a point of intolerability. This book, then, links the late-twentieth-century shifts in American religion directly to the civil rights revolution, and it emphasizes an important step—the expunging from power of moderate evangelicals—in evangelicals’ larger political mobilization. Only as well-honed and homogenously conservative instruments could formerly diverse bodies like the SBC wield their weight in national politics.
This volume addresses an important question about the relationship between conservative faith and conservative politics. Today’s evangelical Christians embrace the politics of the right with a consistency that masquerades as organic affinity. So predictable has the relationship between the two become that participants and observers alike assume that faith in Jesus also demands a belief in small government, untrammeled markets, and a strong national defense. Not only do many viable readings of the Bible dismantle such assumptions, but history upends them as well. The past brims with the records of sincere believers who took the Bible at face value and arrived at different conclusions about the demands of faith for politics; many earnest Christians have devoted themselves to extraordinarily radical, rather than conservative, causes. Contemporary America’s small but vital evangelical left also affirms that no congenital ties bind heartfelt and conservative faith to the politics of the right. At the same time, however, this book argues that the conservative faith of its subjects—conservative because it claims to read the Bible closely, seriously, and even literally—did, in fact, lead adherents inevitably to conservative politics. Thus, while all conservative biblical interpretations do not necessarily dictate right-of-center politics, the specific kind of conservative religion that arose in the racially stratified society of the Jim Crow era did demand these affinities.

Mississippi Praying and Memory of the Civil Rights Movement

Finally, the story of white religion in the civil rights years suggests much for the larger narrative about the quest for black equality. In particular, it speaks to the persistent popular tendency to view this struggle primarily as a morality play. Clear-cut notions of good and evil, right and wrong, pervade our narratives of the racial revolution as perhaps few others in American history, and this rendering often depends on a depiction of Mississippians as exceptionally backward, violent, and resistant. Many of the episodes chronicled in this book endowed those images with extraordinary credibility. Consider the movement’s “high holy days” between 1963 and 1965, when large numbers of northern white ministers forayed into southern communities to confer a Christian endorsement on the struggle. Race-based violence surged dramatically in response to their visits, but the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the
Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed triumphantly, and there you have it—a tale replete with uncomplicated heroes and villains: true white Christians ascendant over ignorant thugs; the forces of good come to slay the demons of racism; America versus Mississippi.\textsuperscript{11}

This book aims to locate the moral dimensions of this story where they properly belong. Several essential and counterproductive misconceptions about the civil rights struggle ensue from framing it primarily as a tale about progressive egalitarians versus unenlightened racists. In the first place, understanding this quest as a matter of people’s personal morality furthers an important error about the sources and causes of blacks’ suffering. It locates the problem of racial injustice almost exclusively in the racist attitudes of mean-spirited individuals. Indeed, some of the problem lay exactly there, but the emphasis on individual racism and the readiness to identify it as such obscures the fact that systems constituted the main instrument of racial subordination. More effectively than psychotic individuals with an inexplicable hatred of black folks, whites cooperated together to create insidious, opaque, and intractable obstacles to black advancement. These pervasive and unyielding barriers, which were both embedded in institutions and self-perpetuating, created corporate economic, social, and political advantages for whites, and many people who displayed little personal racial hatred cherished these systems, participated in them, and benefited from them. And even while they did so, they condemned the personal racism of others and prayed that the thugs in their midst would stop behaving so badly. Good people can and do participate in larger corporate evils, and this paradox renders these systems all the more unyielding, for individual responsibility cannot be easily identified where everyone colludes.

Second, identifying civil rights victories by the conversion of individual racial attitudes significantly distorts movement goals and methods, suggesting that black Americans sought mainly to change white hearts through moral suasion. Indeed, many civil rights activists understood their quest as a moral one; they worked to make America a more just place—one that reflected a new organization of society on essentially different theological foundations. But they also understood that this moral quest required more than changing individuals’ minds. It demanded a radical transformation in the raw distribution of resources, power, and privilege, all of which relate to matters of right and wrong in complicated
and often easily obscured ways. In the pursuit of this goal, moral suasion proved one of the least effective and most readily circumvented strategies, especially where whites’ heavy investments in the racial hierarchy benefited them so stupendously. Movement activists understood that power would concede nothing without a demand, and they effectively deployed their own power in the form of economic coercion, social disruption, government intervention, and public opinion. The movement won victories when it achieved these kinds of essential social, economic, and political alterations, rather than changes in whites’ attitudes.

In fact, blacks happily voted, integrated schools, ran for office, and availed themselves of new economic opportunities in Mississippi, all before white hearts there endured a transformation. Indeed, to the extent that the racial structure changed, these transformations owed little to adjustments in white Mississippian’s moral or religious convictions. Economic coercion and political necessity, not Christian morality, chipped away at the strength of white supremacy. Resistance to black equality from white communities of faith persisted long after the end of de jure segregation and well after high-profile civil rights activity ceased. While the shrillest voices of opposition grew quieter, subtler forms of resistance thrived with significant help from white evangelicals. Well into the 1970s, many Mississippian required convincing that, strange as it seemed, God really wanted them to embrace black folks on conditions of equality. And the continuing segregation of American life today—a reality nowhere more present than in churches—demonstrates that simple acceptance of the idea of racial equality has not necessarily destroyed racial divides.

Religion did little to effect change, but it did undergo its own important transformation as a result of the civil rights struggle. The ultimate arrival of greater equality changed Christian conceptions of morality, not vice versa. Today, Americans widely regard human equality as part and parcel of the Gospel. By 1995, even Southern Baptists, whose Mississippi constituency argued persistently for the racial status quo and on one occasion restrained the entire Southern Baptist Convention from endorsing black civil rights as a legitimate cause, felt compelled to approve a resolution that “affirm[ed] the Bible’s teaching that every human life is sacred, and is of equal and immeasurable worth, made in God’s image, regardless of race or ethnicity.” Yet this rather late
pronouncement, with its specific application to race relations, articulated a truth newly elevated to status as an uncontested and important Christian tenet. A change in the culture found its way, after the fact, to expression in the churches. Because it too easily reverses itself in favorite tellings of the story, the actual sequence of this transformation merits underscoring: changes in Mississippi’s racial structure came first, and the religious ideology to accompany it came afterward.

Though most evangelicals today believe that Christianity requires a commitment to racial equality, they continue to frame morality, and especially racial morality, in individual terms. “Thou shalt not be a racist” now ranks with proscriptions against sexual sin and taking the name of the Lord in vain. Thus white evangelicals, like many other Americans, celebrate racial egalitarianism and antiracism with little understanding of the movement’s goals and methods and without grappling with the aspects related to power and privilege. Like the church of the civil rights years, they nourish a myth and a morality that render invisible the structural inequalities that continue to exist for black Americans and other groups as well as their own collusion in such systems. As Michael Emerson and Christian Smith have shown, though white Christians now enthusiastically support the idea of racial equality, they also nearly universally believe that all obstacles to black advancement have disappeared. Not unlike the white Mississippi Christians of the mid-twentieth century, their descendants all over the country place sole blame for gaps in black and white achievement on black Americans themselves.

Writing in 1964, the historian and former Baptist preacher Richard Marius offered an analysis of the apparent paradox that Mississippi presented. Explaining that “the most abysmal failures of the church grow out of its most ringing triumphs,” Marius laid a heavy responsibility for the South’s racial system at the feet of evangelical religion. Yet Marius also contended that deep complicity in a great moral evil did not erase the great good that also ensued from this tradition: “we must be of two minds about the church in . . . the South or perhaps in the world. As moral beings and as Christians, we must judge it both theologically and ethically for what it has not done. But at the same time we cannot afford to wash our hands of a bad business and dismiss from serious consideration the potential contribution of this vast institution, so powerful and yet so weak.”