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The Trials of Robert Ryland



Edward L. Ayers

Edward L. Ayers is president of the University of Richmond.

Fred Anderson and his colleagues have done a remarkable job envisioning, and then fulfilling that vision, of this conference.

I'm proud that the University is able to collaborate with our longtime friends and allies in the Virginia Baptist Historical Society and at Virginia Union. Our histories are intertwined, and this is a fitting way for us to remember and honor our shared legacies. I hope all of you will find opportunities to attend the other terrific programs planned for this event.

I am flattered that Fred trusted me to give this address, but I struggled, frankly, about the best way to live up to this opportunity. It finally came to me when I realized that over the last four years, during the sesquicentennial of the Civil War and Emancipation, I have found myself speaking before religious organizations more than any other groups. I have visited with Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches, rural and urban, eager to consider their roles in slavery, war, and segregation, and I have visited Beth Ahabah as well as the Islamic Cultural Center.

As I have spoken at many other places over the last four years, I have found religious congregations to be especially honest with themselves and especially thoughtful about the meanings of the history whose consequences we live with every day. Much of the leadership of our community's struggles with that history, for the last twenty years, has been led by people from many religious faiths and religious communities, from which they have drawn the strength to confront what others would prefer

to avoid. Clearly, faith, freedom, and forgiveness are in fact deeply related.

This evening I want to puzzle with you about something appropriate to this occasion, something that I think goes to the heart of what we are talking about over the next two days. And that is the story of a predecessor of mine in the presidency of the University of Richmond, Robert Ryland.

Robert Ryland tried to behave in a generous Christian way with the African-American people among whom he lived all his life even as he presided over what he recognized was a compromised form of the church. He faced skepticism and criticism from all sides, and experienced considerable doubt, but he pressed on.

We are not exactly sure what to do with such a person. To live as a white person in the slave South was to be, unavoidably, implicated in slavery, to benefit from slavery. And Ryland himself owned at least seven slaves. To give all you had to the Confederacy was to be implicated in its cause of creating an autonomous slaveholding nation, one self-consciously and proudly Christian, as profoundly contradictory as that seems to us. And Ryland did that, too.

But Ryland did more than those things; he worked alongside his black fellow Baptists, trying to sustain the marrow of his faith and of theirs even as he paid Caesar what Caesar demanded.

His story holds up a mirror to our own time and to ourselves. How will we, whatever our background and whatever our skin color, be judged by those who follow us? Are we, too, complicit in the great and growing inequality and injustice all around us? Are we, too, giving away too much by aligning ourselves with the institutions and values of our own time and place?

I am not profound on these issues. I am neither a theologian nor a philosopher. I tell stories. Sometimes, though, even stories can help us see ourselves more clearly. For the stories to be useful, they need to refrain from too quickly judging the people of the past. Judging them is easy, of course, because they are dead and cannot fight back. For that same reason, winning an argument with them is empty. Rather, it is better to try to understand why they did the things they did. The decisions they should have made seem obvious to us in retrospect and yet they, at least as human and perhaps as humane as we are, did not.

Far more than most people, Rev. Robert Ryland embodied the

struggles of his time and place. Let me sketch his story for you. In doing so, I draw upon the work of Virginia Baptists for generations past and present, who have assiduously maintained the records of the church and shared them with me through the Virginia Baptist Historical Society. I also draw upon the work of several of my friends and former doctoral students—Charles Irons, Beth Barton Schweiger, and Gregg Kimball—who have written superb books on Virginia and its religious history.

Robert Ryland was born in King and Queen County in 1805. His father offered each of his sons a farm, but Robert chose to take his inheritance in education instead. He went to Columbian College, now George Washington University, and was one of its first graduates in 1826. It had three faculty members, one tutor, and thirty students in a single building. It was a non-sectarian institution, and Ryland received a liberal arts education.

in 1824 Ryland was baptized in the famous Bruington Baptist Church in King and Queen (where I had the pleasure of speaking a couple of years ago). He became a pastor in Lynchburg for his first five years out of college and married in 1830. He was on the rise.

Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831 and the crackdown that followed on African-American preachers, churches, gatherings, and reading, suddenly changed Ryland's Virginia. For decades, black preaching had been tolerated, even encouraged. Now the state of Virginia prohibited it.

Ryland argued in the *Religious Herald* that white Christians had the right and responsibility to minister to enslaved people around them. With others, he called for a mission to the slaves, an active crusade to evangelize among men, women, and children in slavery despite the long-simmering fear and contempt unleashed in the wake of the Turner rebellion.

And African Americans, free and enslaved, clearly found in the church a strength in a world arrayed against them. The number of black evangelical Christians in Virginia doubled between 1830 and 1850. They recruited and converted each other, but white ministers mattered as well.

White ministers had to strike a deal if they were to work among their free and enslaved black neighbors. To make the argument that white Christians had a responsibility to reach out to black Christians, Ryland, like all other white southern evangelicals, had to reassure other whites that this was not abolition in disguise. Thus, in that same 1835 article in the *Religious Herald* in which he argued for a mission to the

slaves, the young Ryland pointed out that the Bible implicitly sanctioned slavery in the command that masters give to servants their due.

These words would be repeated *ad nauseum* in the coming decades. But even as Ryland made that argument, even as he insisted that the argument in favor of ministering to the enslaved “was manly and just,” and the views “sound and liberal, and the conclusions logical,” he admitted that “I do not wish to be considered an advocate for slavery, though I *appear* to be, in the above remarks. I feel the perplexity of the subject.”¹

That was a fine, and wavering, line for a young man of ambition in such prominent positions and publications to walk—rationalizing slavery without advocating for it. Soon, *only* advocates of slavery would have any kind of a role in Virginia, in the South, and in the churches. The “perplexity of the subject” would be banished, and only enforced certainty would prevail.

In the meantime, Ryland took on a new job: creating the institution that would become the University of Richmond. “He was not only Superintendent but the only teacher, when the Seminary opened on July 4, 1832, at Spring Farm, with a student body that ‘did not exceed ten’—all preparing for the ministry,”² one institutional history tells us. “Under Dr. Ryland’s leadership, the institution grew from a Seminary with one teacher to a College which at the beginning of the Civil War had an endowment of \$100,000, a faculty of six professors and one tutor, and an average attendance of about one hundred twenty students.”³

To build this institution from nothing into a healthy college with an impressive building not far from the state Capitol, Ryland had to stay on the good side of Baptists across the Commonwealth. Indeed, he relentlessly implored Baptist congregations to contribute to Richmond College, to create an educated Baptist ministry.

So Ryland had important institutional responsibilities throughout the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, serving Baptist congregations across the entire state in a time of great growth and sectional conflict. It would have been wise, perhaps, for him to have kept his head down.

Instead, it was in those years that Ryland became part of a bold new experiment. As early as the 1820s, black Richmonders petitioned for their own separate church. The young city was growing rapidly, and African Americans—enslaved and free—made up about half of the population.

About one in five were free blacks and ran their own businesses, families, and households. They wanted to run their own churches, too.

They were rebuffed, however, until the First Baptist Church of Richmond took the lead. By 1838 that flourishing church had become too small for its congregation and its architecture was, as Ryland put it, “far behind the times.”

The mixed character of the audience, composed of white and colored people, was thought to militate seriously against the progress of the Church. The colored element was so large, that only a small part of it could be furnished with sittings. Its spiritual oversight was still more difficult to be managed. A large proportion of this class, being slaves, could not be reached and disciplined, except by persons of their own color. Few of them could attend the church-meetings. And the instructions of the pulpit could not be always adapted especially to their wants.⁴

But First Baptist didn't know if it could afford to build a separate new building for its colored members—or if it was even legal to do so, given the strictures of state law.

Of course, knowing the history of segregation that followed the Civil War, it seems strange to think that the Commonwealth would worry about creating a separate building for black Richmonders, but many whites thought that black Christians should not be permitted to worship beyond the sight of white people. “And if the measure were strictly legal,” Ryland wondered, “would *public sentiment*, on some subjects far more potent and more jealous than law, quietly acquiesce in the arrangement?”⁵ Would white people, in other words, especially those without devotion to the church or even antagonistic to it, tolerate black congregations with any kind of autonomy? First Baptist and Robert Ryland went ahead, with a large audience of skeptics of both races warily watching.

The arrangement they came up with was also surprising: the white church would build the building and deed it to the black members when they had raised half the cost of the structure. That meant black Richmonders were responsible for \$4,500, nearly a hundred thousand dollars today. They did raise that amount, and the sacrifice it entailed is hard for us to imagine. The free black members had more to contribute than

the enslaved among whom they lived and were often related to, but they were obviously hard pressed themselves to come up with so much money. But they did.

The constitution of the church declared that the white minister would be paid five hundred dollars per year, raised by the “penny collections” at every meeting. The white Baptist churches of the city agreed to make up any difference, but they never had to.

The founders of the new church approached the young president of Richmond College to take on that role as well. He frankly admitted that he was tired of traveling to country churches many Sundays, which kept him away from home and the college more than he wished, and speaking at the new First African Baptist church would be easier on his family. But he also said that he felt “he had no *right* to *excuse* himself from the duty of *helping forward* so important an object.”⁶

Ryland later admitted that slavery “had long been a burden to his mind.”⁷ He did not believe that it was intrinsically a sin, but he did believe “that some grievous sins were closely and constantly *connected* with it. The separation of husbands and wives, and of parents and young children, for mere gain, and the prohibition to teach colored children to read the word of God, except under very limited conditions, he regarded as *glaring wrongs*.”⁸ Ryland said he had always seen in slavery “the mysterious hand of God leading the African to Jesus,”⁹ and he did not understand how “that negroes, without exception, should be forbidden to preach, however qualified and sanctioned by their respective churches.”¹⁰ This prohibition, he wrote, “seemed not only to violate freedom of conscience in regard both to the whites and the blacks, but to attempt to contravene the manifest purpose of God in permitting slavery. In common with all his thoughtful fellow-citizens, he had long been oppressed with these reflections, but the whole subject was too delicate and embarrassing to admit of ventilation.”¹¹ The very heart of evangelical Christianity, of course, depends on the sinner *choosing* to acknowledge his or her sins and seek forgiveness. How could an enslaved person make that choice in such a constrained environment? So, in 1841, Ryland took on the work, despite the “odium that would certainly be connected.”¹²

The constitution of the new church provided for thirty African-American deacons who would be “the ruling element of the Church.”

Ryland recalled them as an “intelligent, godly, and highly respected body of men”¹³ who wanted only “their own spiritual culture, the salvation of their people, the peace and order of society, and the glory of God.”¹⁴ They were elected by the congregation, and most of them were free blacks, but some were enslaved. As Charles Irons puts it, the “deacons served as the community’s judges, patrons, and ambassadors. . . . With a total annual budget that reached \$3,000 in the late 1850s, the deacons were able to feed hundreds of the hungry, patronize free black businessmen for church-related services, and even help purchase at least three fortunate souls from slavery.”¹⁵ The church, one of the largest buildings in Richmond, was also rented out to white groups for everything from political meetings to literary addresses.

Ryland declared that he treated the deacons and the congregants in all his “official intercourse, exactly as I would a white congregation, *ie, with the great possible respect*. If they were slaves,” he said, he thought “of them as Christ’s freemen—if free, as Christ’s slaves. In truth, brethren, the gospel knows no white, no black, no rich, no poor, no bond, no free, no North, no South, no East, no West. The gospel was devised for man, and man needs the gospel.”¹⁶

Inspiring words, immediately followed by these that deflate those that preceded them: He preached, Ryland said, to “preach *out* of their mind their dreams and fancies, their visions and revelations, and all their long cherished superstitions—and to preach *into* their minds a knowledge of the great facts of the religion, with its consequent doctrines, obligations, and privileges.”¹⁷ Were those dreams and fancies of freedom, of earthly deliverance, of reunited families? Ryland wrote a catechism of fifty-two lessons for his black congregation, with yes-or-no answers, that reinforced the duty of slaves to obey their masters. That same book, Mayor Mayo of Richmond charged, was an invitation and an aid to help slaves learn how to read, but Ryland persisted.

Ryland recognized that the congregation possessed powerful preachers among its numbers who could not, by law, be permitted to speak from the pulpit. But, “as a sort of recompense for this slight, they, and others, were called on to pray, several times, at each religious service. Many of these prayers exhibited great fervency and power, and afforded the highest degree of comfort, both to those who offered them and to

those who heard them."¹⁸ And when "the vast congregation poured out its full soul in the old-fashioned songs, the long and loud bursts of praise reminded one of the 'sound of many waters.'"¹⁹

Ryland admitted, in refreshing deadpan modesty, that "there is no doubt but that to these devotional accompaniments—prayer and praise—was due the largest part of the spirituality of the Church, and of the success of the ministry in winning souls."²⁰ He did not delude himself, in other words, into thinking that his sermons were the great attraction of First African Baptist. In fact, he quickly discovered that many of his congregants arrived only when their fellow African Americans began to speak; annoyed and then dismayed after several efforts to persuade them to arrive on time, Ryland finally ordered the doors locked after the services began.

By 1855, First Richmond African Baptist could boast 3,000 members. Those members disciplined one other and sought to maintain marriages among slaves and between slave and free that the state of Virginia denied existed. Few white people, including Ryland, paid close attention to the work of the African Americans in the church, creating a rare space for leadership and autonomy, if only by default.

The church, moreover, spun off many daughter congregations, with Second Baptist having more than 2,000 members by 1860. The example spread to all the largest cities of Virginia. Ryland said that "among the *highest circles* of society he believed there was the *kindest interest* felt in its welfare and permanence."²¹ He admitted, though, that "to say that no suspicions were cherished—that no surmisings were expressed—that no diminution of respect and appreciation was shown by some person, would be going beyond the limits of truth. It sometimes requires a little moral courage to obey the dictates of conscience. But let all this pass."²²

Now, those words were written many years after the fact, after those things had indeed passed. At the time, it was harder to be so calm. Here is Ryland again, but this time describing the situation in the middle of the moment, in the 1850s. His struggles with duty and faith are clear. "The church has passed through some severe *trials* during its brief career," he admitted. The severest trial turned around those who escaped slavery and used the church as an unwitting ally to help others escape as well. Ryland explained:

Persons moving away from Richmond, without getting letters of dismission, would write back to their friends and request them to obtain letters and forward them. Persons recently settled in town would have their testimonials of membership sent to them here. As the pastor of the church was naturally entrusted with such matters, all these letters were sent to my care, placed in my box, and finally laid on my table. Not knowing the parties oftentimes, and having no other method of distribution, I announced them from the pulpit on Sunday at the close of the worship, and the respective parties came up and received them. This gave greater publicity to the plan, and thus no doubt suggested the idea of using it for a different purpose and on a wider scale. About this time several servants escaped to the North, from their masters, and wrote back to their former comrades, here, detailing the manner of their escape, and proposing to them facilities and information for the same experiment. These letters were of course sent to my care, and very unsuspectingly distributed along with others. Fortunately, however, for me, they were distributed with the same open and public fearlessness that all others had been.²³

The authorities discovered a ring that aided runaways without his knowledge and Ryland was cleared, but . . .

I was mortified to perceive that a *few* of the congregation had abused my confidence, and had caused me unwillingly to desecrate the pastoral office to purposes foreign to its design. It *was* certainly no part of my purpose—and *should have been* none in assuming that relation, to use my influence, either secretly or publicly to disturb the legalized usages of society. The path of duty is plainly marked out to me in the New Testament—to inculcate both on masters and servants such principles as would tend to their mutual improvement and happiness. I felt impelled by a sense of propriety to announce to the congregation that I should not in the future deliver any letters from the North without a personal acquaintance with and full confidence in the recipients. The letters were suffered to remain in the post office, and I was released from a great annoyance and from unjust suspicions.²⁴

But Ryland found himself besieged from the other direction as well, from those who wanted him to use his ministry to ensnare runaways:

I was mortified to learn that some white persons, even some professing Christians, advised me still to take the letters from the office, to read them, and to communicate their contents, if any plot was being formed to escape to their masters! Here, again, was a total misconception of the *spirit* and *genius* of the pastoral office. I *had* not the least intention, *should* have had none, when I became the pastor of the colored people, to degrade my office to a police to detect and to apprehend *runaways*! Let them who are appointed to this work, and who have a taste for it, engage in it. Be it mine to preach the gospel, to watch for souls, to make full proof of my ministry. To have aided servants to flee from their masters, or masters to detect their fugitive slaves, would have been equally aside from my duty, and equally destructive of all my capacity to do good. This whole occurrence was fraught with danger to the church. It raised up a host of suspicions against us, and taught us a lesson of caution.

Robert Ryland was never able to relax this tension, this fundamental contradiction in his work.

Gregg Kimball, who has written a wonderful history of antebellum Richmond, notes that First African Baptist was “a node on a much larger network of religion, family, and memory in the African diaspora. The network stretched back to Africa and northward to Canada. It was a fragile link to home and family for some sent to the Deep South through Richmond’s infamous slave markets.”²⁵ The far-flung networks of the church correspondence, in other words, did not serve merely to aid runaways but to sustain families, to connect fellow Christians.

To our ears, of course, the fact that Ryland was mortified by the charges that he might have helped runaways rings harshly. And this helps account for the blistering charge by the famous Richmonder, Henry “Box” Brown, who after watching his family sold and marched in front of him in chains, had himself shipped to allies and freedom in Philadelphia. As Brown worked on behalf of abolition to audiences throughout the North and England, he leveled charges at Robert Ryland. You’ll recognize some of the things Ryland himself wrote about the church, though from a very different angle:

The Rev. R. Ryland, who preached for the coloured people, was professor at the Baptist seminary near the city of Richmond, and the coloured people had to pay him a salary of 700 dollars per annum, although they neither chose him nor had the least control over him. He did not consider himself bound to preach regularly, but only when he was not otherwise engaged, so he preached about 40 sermons a year and was a zealous supporter of the slave-holders' cause; and, so far as I could judge, he had no notion whatever of the pure religion of Jesus Christ. He used to preach from such texts as that in the epistle to the Ephesians, where St. Paul says, "servants be obedient to them that are your masters and mistresses according to the flesh, and submit to them with fear and trembling"; he was not ashamed to invoke the authority of heaven in support of the slave-degrading laws under which masters could with impunity abuse their fellow creatures.²⁶

The two men describe the same institutional arrangements, but one was free and one was enslaved, one was white and the other black, one delivered the sermons and the other heard them, so they saw different realities.

The historian Charles Irons explains the larger consequence to First African Baptist: "In the success of the quasi-independent [black] churches, whites received an enormous boost in the intensifying sectional conflict over slavery."²⁷ The Methodist *Richmond Christian Advocate* put it this way, with remarkable clarity: "Which party most strictly conforms to the doctrines and practice of Christ and the Apostles? Those who seek to save the souls of the slave population of the country [in the quasi-independent black churches] or those who strive merely for their freedom?"²⁸

The churches were something of a trap for black Virginians, damned if they did join the churches and damned if they didn't. Charles Irons again:

If they did submit to some sort of nominal white religious oversight and seek membership in an evangelical church, enslaved Virginians reinforced whites' belief that slavery was a benign vehicle for Christianization. If they instead rejected the mission as proslavery garbage, bonded Virginians only offered more proof that slavery was necessary—that blacks needed more time in the refining fire of slavery to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus.²⁹

First African Baptist flourished but found itself in the center of irreconcilable conflicts at the heart of a slave society based on Christianity.

When war descended on Virginia and on Richmond in 1861, Ryland once again stepped to the fore. He appeared in the *Richmond Dispatch* several times throughout the Civil War years. At the war's outset, Ryland urged Christians to visit the wounded and ill soldiers in the camps to pray with them and to bring them religious books. At that same meeting, in May 1861, the Baptist association praised "the manifest improvement which has been made in Virginia in the religious and moral condition of our colored people within the past thirty or forty years, instead of dreams and visions, as was formerly the case. We now hear from the colored people who join our churches an intelligent account of the work of grace in their hearts, accompanied with a clear view of the doctrines and duties of the Gospel."³⁰ They singled out First African Baptist and praised Dr. Ryland, "who for twenty years has devoted himself with untiring zeal to the work."³¹

The next month, Ryland spoke about a different subject in starkly different language:

The long-cherished hatred of the Northern States towards the institutions of the South, has at length developed itself in an aggressive and cruel war—a war which, in the inadequacy of its cause, in the earnest efforts of the assailed to avert it by peaceful adjustments, and in deliberate purpose to exterminate or subjugate brothers whose chief crime consists in asking to be let alone, has no parallel among civilized nations. Our reliance for ministers of the Gospel must henceforth be, under God, exclusively on ourselves. While we cherish, with undiminished confidence, those brethren among us who, though born and bred at the North, are yet royal and true to the South, we proclaim it on the house-top, that in the future our churches will not, and should not, accept a single evangelist coming from that corrupted region. What was once a prejudice, that time and acquaintance often overcame, is now a stern and settled principle, that will admit of no discussion—no modification—no relaxation.

"We have convincing and painful evidence," Ryland concluded, "that a large majority of the so-called ministers of the Prince of Peace are active instigators of the crusade against our soil, our homes, our wives, our

daughters. The inference is that our educational labors, instead of being lessened, must hereafter be greatly augmented." During the war, he admonished:

[E]very dollar, if needed, shall be given to the holy cause of maintaining our independence. But as soon as victory shall perch on our banners, as it surely will in the end, and we shall be recognized, as we shall inevitably be, by European Powers and the United States as a distinct confederacy, a scene of prosperity, unexampled in our past career, will open upon us, and then we shall call on every lover of his country to give holy to the cause of emancipation from ignorance, as he does now to the cause of deliverance from social and political oppression.³²

We know, of course, that the new confederacy would never have that history. Instead, in April 1865 black federal troops would march into Richmond and would bar Ryland from preaching at First African Baptist. Statements such as the one he made in 1861 apparently continued throughout the war, and he had exhorted the enslaved people in his congregation to stay with their owners. The members of the church voted to hear him preach one final time in the spring of 1865. I would love to know what he said, but here is what he wrote in his memoirs: "At the close of the war," when the rules of the church were "so far modified, as to adapt them to the new relations which the colored people sustained to society. The Pastor [Ryland] then offered his resignation, from a belief that they would *naturally* and *justly* prefer a minister of their own color. This resignation was proposed and accepted with mutual kindness and good will."³³

Robert Ryland lost everything in the war. In 1865 he had nothing left but "\$10 in gold and a good milk cow." To support himself, he sold milk on the streets of Richmond. The other institution to which Robert Ryland was committed, Richmond College, also lost everything in the Civil War. The trustees pledged the college's resources, laboriously gained over the preceding thirty years, to the Confederacy. A fifth of the graduates of Richmond College died fighting for the Confederacy, and the college saw its buildings occupied by federal troops, its endowment rendered worthless, its books and apparatus scattered, its once booming city in ashes.

After emancipation Ryland, stepping down as president, taught at a

school for freed people in Richmond—based in Lumpkin's Jail, the only available space—but left Richmond in 1868 for Kentucky, where he served as president of female schools in three different communities. He died in 1899. Before he died, he left this final message in his memoirs, written when a new system of segregation was being created, when the vote was being stripped away, when lynching reached its all-time peak:

It is a misconception of the African race, which many Anglo-Saxons cherish, *that all negroes are alike*. While the whole human family are depraved, and the sameness of condition, surrounding a particular tribe, will impress on it a peculiar type of character, still there is as much *individuality*—as much variety of intellectual and moral temperament—among the negroes as there is among persons of any other race. I have witnessed as bright examples of godliness, of disinterested kindness, of real gentility of manners, and of native mental shrewdness among them, as among other people.³⁴

It tells us a lot that he had to write those words, to drive home the point that people are people.

Back in Richmond, in the meantime, dozens of members of the First African Baptist Church became ministers. Baptized a slave by Ryland in 1842 and ordained a deacon by him in 1856, James H. Holmes became pastor of the First African Baptist Church in 1867. Holmes taught alongside Ryland in the school at Lumpkin's Jail. As Charles Irons puts it, Holmes “had trained in chains for a marvelously successful pastorate of one of the world’s largest Protestant churches, one that lasted for thirty-three years.”³⁵ John Jasper, also baptized by Ryland in 1842, founded Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Jackson Ward and became perhaps the most famous man in the city in the decades after emancipation. Robert Ryland ended his memoirs with these words: “The negroes are now all free, and I am heartily glad of it, though I say nothing of the agencies and methods by which the event was accomplished.” (He obviously did not approve of Reconstruction, in other words.) “They are our *fellow-men—our fellow-citizens*—and many of them our *fellow-Christians*. Let [us] treat them in the spirit of our common Christianity.”³⁶

In all honesty, few white southerners followed Ryland's call for the spirit of Christianity, of the golden rule. The churches became steadily

and profoundly more segregated and remain so to the present day. The bargain at the heart of First African Baptist became hard to imagine for either blacks or whites, the conditions of forced intimacy passing away. Few black Richmonders pined for a church with a white minister, and few white Richmonders cared much what happened in the black churches.

Long before official segregation settled over Richmond, over Virginia, and over the South, a profound silence developed between black people and white people, even those with the bonds of faith to tie them together.

What lessons do we draw from this complicated story as we launch out upon our discussions of faith, freedom, and forgiveness? We are reminded, as history always reminds us, that people are people in all times and places. But we are also always reminded that the conditions in which we live matter. Those conditions define the contexts of our lives, of our own struggles and decisions, and they change relentlessly.

It is not enough to change people's hearts and minds. We need to change the conditions in which people live, in which people meet. We need to move beyond the very real if no longer legal segregation we have inherited and that we passively sustain. This conference shows us that talking about the past that first divided us can provide a valuable place to come together, a place to think about what could finally and more fully unite us. **BH&HS**

¹Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 173.

²Woodford B. Hackley, *Faces on the Wall* (Richmond: Virginia Baptist Historical Society, 1955), 90.

³*Ibid.*

⁴Robert Ryland, *The First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond* (Richmond: Carlton McCarthy, 1880), 247-48.

⁵*Ibid.*, 248.

⁶*Ibid.*, 252.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*, 252-53.

⁹*Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*, 254.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Irons, *Origins*, 189.

¹⁶Ryland, *First Century*, 255.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 258-59.

¹⁹Ibid., 259.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., 257.

²²Ibid., 263.

²³Rev. B. Manly, Jr., *American Baptist Memorial*, vol. 15 (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, Printer, 1856), 323.

²⁴Ibid., 323-24.

²⁵Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 125.

²⁶Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* (Manchester: Printed by Lee and Glynn, 1851), 32.

²⁷Irons, *Origins*, 190.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰*The Richmond Daily Dispatch*, June 8, 1863.

³¹Ibid.

³²*The Richmond Daily Dispatch*, May 14, 1861.

³³Ryland, *First Century*, 263-64.

³⁴Ibid., 264.

³⁵Irons, *Origins*, 255.

³⁶Ryland, *First Century*, 272.