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**WILLIAM MORRIS FORD, PASTOR OF FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH,
LONGVIEW, TEXAS, AND THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST VIEW OF
RACE RELATIONS 1945-1971**

by Blanche Henderson Brick

In his study of southern white Protestantism in the twentieth century, Kenneth K. Bailey noted that "of all the problems in the social order, race relations was the one problem which most unsettled – and indeed imperiled – the Southern churches."¹ Bailey stated that the Southern Baptist Convention took a historic step in 1946 when it designated a special committee to draft a race relations pronouncement. This led to a statement of principles that acknowledged the convention's responsibility for the promotion of inter-racial good-will and "urged upon Baptists and all Christians the duty of ordering our racial attitudes and actions in accordance with Christian truth and Christian love."²

Bailey also noted that in 1954 the Southern Baptist Convention's response to the *Brown v Board of Education* decision was to acknowledge that "Baptists, as the largest religious group in the South, bore heavy responsibilities for finding a 'Christian solution' to the crisis."³

In spite of these lofty claims, the most commonly accepted view of Southern Baptist responses to racial prejudice and to the Supreme Court decision of 1954 is that congregations resisted any change that might lead to racial equality. In *Texas Baptist Leadership and Social Christianity*, John Storey suggested that "Texas Baptists believed the gospel of Jesus was the solution to the nettlesome racial problem. But they did not expect Christianization to advance the cause of racial equality."⁴

In Texas it is generally assumed that East Texas Baptists were the most vocal supporters of racial prejudice⁵ and therefore of segregation of public schools across the South and that all members of the Southern Baptist clergy in East Texas reflected these views from their pulpits. Such an assumption is not entirely accurate, as a study of the ministry of Dr. W. Morris Ford, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Longview, Texas, from 1945 until 1971, illustrates.

Ford came to Longview at the end of World War II from Jackson, Tennessee. Previously he had served at Calvary Baptist Church in Kansas City, Missouri. He was graduated from the seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, where he received the Th.M. and Ph.D. degrees. An accomplished vocalist, he had considered a career in opera. Although Ford was not from East Texas, he was warmly received during his twenty-six year ministry by a church deeply rooted in the traditions of that region.

As Bernice Northcutt wrote in "The Story of Our Church," the First Baptist Church in Longview was founded in what was then Upshur County in 1871 "by seventeen men and women who had moved from various states of

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the South after the Civil War.”⁶ It was a segregated church and essentially remains one today. What is important is to understand the message Ford preached during the 1950s and 1960s as it related not only to race relations but to other areas of concern during those troubled years.

In reading the *Longview Daily News* during these years, one cannot miss the fact that freedom in 1945 was a concern that related to events in Europe and in the Pacific more specifically than to the area of racial relations in the United States. But neither can one reach the conclusion that Southern Baptists were indifferent to the social ills of their times nor that Ford’s sermons failed to address these concerns.

On June 4, 1945, the first page of the *Longview Daily News* carried an announcement of Ford’s arrival on June 5, 1945, and an invitation to attend services on Sunday, June 10, his first Sunday as minister. Also included were headlines noting that a “Huge Pacific War Expansion is Due” and other articles informing East Texans that “Prime Minister Churchill opened the Conservative Party’s election campaign Monday night with a forthright attack against the Socialist policy of the Labor Party.”⁷

The front page of the paper also carried a story with the heading “Negro Loses on Appeal in Texas Murder Sentence.” The Supreme Court had rejected a Black man’s contention that he was a victim of discrimination because only one Negro served on the grand jury that had indicted him.⁸

On June 8, 1945, the *Longview Daily News* carried a picture of Pastor Ford and noted that he would preach his first regular sermon on Sunday. Next to this picture was an article on the “Successful End to United Nations Conference.” A smaller heading read, “Accepting of Plan of Reds Widely Hailed.”⁹

These stories indicate what was on the minds of the people of the First Baptist Church when Ford began his ministry in June 1945. The war in the Pacific was still a primary concern and the fear of socialism and communist Russia were real concerns for the members of the church and the entire city. The newspapers were filled with warnings about the battles still to be fought now that the European war had ended. And the inclusion of the article about racial prejudice on the front page of the *Longview Daily News* suggests that this too was an issue of concern to the white and African American populations as early as 1945.

During his ministry in Longview, as well as in his earlier pastorates, Ford spoke on such issues as racial relations, concerns of socialism, and condemnation of consumerism. He did so primarily by offering the basic Baptist belief that faith must be based on an individual relationship with God and that no one who calls himself a Christian can escape the responsibility this commitment entails. In a review of Keith Harper’s *The Quality of Southern Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity, 1890-1920* in *The Journal of Southern History*, Pamela Dean suggests that this message is consistent with Southern Baptist philosophy, which did not accept the Social Gospel but

“advocated a more conservative social Christianity that stressed individual sin as the source of social evils and individual conversion as the cure.”¹⁰

John Storey supported this view in *Texas Baptist Leadership and Social Christianity*, suggesting that “whereas leading social gospel thinkers of the North generally proposed social and institutional solutions to such issues as inadequate wages or child labor, even the most socially conscious Texas Baptist remained firmly committed, at least until the Great Depression, to individual salvation as the cure for social inequities.”¹¹

In 1945, one of Ford’s first sermons in Longview was titled “The Cross Destroys Idealism,” using Galatians 2:21 as the scriptural reference: “If righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.” He noted that it was the “cross’ power to destroy indifference, loneliness, selfishness, race hatred, sin, and false idealism”¹² rather than some idealistic view of man.

Also in 1945 in Longview he preached a sermon titled “The Cross Destroys Race Hatred.” His notes indicate that he had preached this sermon in 1944 in Jackson, Tennessee, and would preach it again in Longview in 1955 and 1964, two crucial years in the Civil Rights era. The scripture was Romans 10:9-13. In the sermon he stated:

When we say that the ground at the cross is level ground we mean that the gospel is for all people everywhere. . . So far as accepting Jesus Christ is concerned the ground is level all over the world! No one person has priority. No one race of people has priority...now some of us, if we think about that a great deal won’t like it because we have very deep prejudices and we don’t mind letting people know about our prejudices. And so we get to thinking about who might be the next door neighbor in heaven and we become a little concerned about it. But we shouldn’t. The ground there is level too.

The cross destroys race hatred. I cannot bring up all the problems and if I brought them up I couldn’t solve them. But...I believe you will agree with me, even holding on to many prejudices I believe you will agree with me tonight in what I have to say because it is rather hard to differ with Jesus, isn’t it?¹³

At this point Ford suggested that racial conflict did not exist only between black and white residents of the United States. He mentioned witnessing tensions between the Nationalist Chinese and the people of Indonesia. He suggested a solution, stressing, as always, the need for individuals to confront their own prejudices:

What are we going to do about it? What shall I do about my prejudices? Well, I am going to face the cross and I am going to find my answer in Christ Jesus who dies for all. I know this is not going to solve every individual’s social problem, but it is going to give a wonderfully broad base of truth for us to build on...we are going to continue to have race problems because of irritations and misunderstandings...but there is a solution for the individual. That’s a solution I must find for my own life – I cannot answer for you. The solution for my own life must be found as I look at the cross and see Christ dying for me.

We can become very arrogant and boastful about our achievements but

when we look at the treatment of the aboriginal who inhabited this land, we could hang our heads in shame. We have a responsibility to the American Negro who was brought by force to this country as a slave, made to work, denied education, denied freedom through all the years. We have a debt to pay for injuries inflicted. Do you think Germany will ever be able to pay the debt inflicted upon the Jews? Italy on Ethiopia?

We live in troubled times, in difficult times. No one of us knows all of the answers. But I tell you tonight we need as individuals to face these problems and to solve them at the foot of the cross. I am saying to you as individuals that you meet Christ on the level ground at the foot of the cross and find your answer.¹⁴

The sermon is even more remarkable if one remembers what community members read daily about the battles to integrate public schools throughout the South. On September 3, 1954, the *Longview Daily News* printed an article entitled "Acceptance of Negro Canceled," reporting that the University of Texas had revoked its acceptance of Marion George Ford, Jr., a black man from Houston.¹⁵ The article reported that the school's offer had been withdrawn because Ford's intended major, chemical engineering, was offered at Prairie View A&M College. It also noted that Ford had indicated that he planned to try out for the freshman football team. On November 2, 1954, the newspaper reported that strong anti-integration moves were taking place in Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina.¹⁶ On November 15, 1954, the newspaper's lead article was headlined "Shepperd Advises Gradual Transition." The text reported that "Attorney General [John Ben] Shepperd warned the U.S. Supreme Court that any attempt to compel desegregation of Texas public schools, except by 'gradual adjustment' faces the threat of violence."¹⁷

The barrage of articles about integration continued into the next year. On September 1, 1955, the *Longview Daily News* informed its readers that "the Old South tradition of segregation appeared broken, with Negroes attending public school with white children for the first time in Bexar County."¹⁸ On September 29, the paper reported that "Governor Allan Shivers says the Supreme Court. . .stepped out of their judicial robes' when they ruled segregation in public schools was unconstitutional."¹⁹ On October 2, an article covered a talk by Longview attorney Merritt H. Gibson to the Kiwanis Club about "Black Monday." Gibson's title referred to May 17 of the previous year, the date on which the Supreme Court decision in *Brown* voided segregation laws. Gibson asserted that the court "didn't base its decision on the constitution. Its authority was a study by Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish sociologist, who made a study of U.S. race problems."²⁰ Gibson claimed that Myrdal had been a member of communist-front organizations and suggested that the goal of integrationists was "an amalgamation or mongrelization, of the Anglo-Saxon race."²¹

Like the newspaper articles, Ford's sermons also reflected concerns about communist and socialist threats to Christianity. In July 1962 he preached on "Strange Miracle" from John 2:1-11. In discussing the wedding at Canaan and

Jesus' attendance, Ford reiterated his support of a traditional view of marriage, which he suggested was threatened by communist ideologies that made the individual subservient to the state.²²

The state has the control of the home. It is all right for people not to marry. It is all right for children to be born out of wedlock. It is all right for the state to control the birth of children, the training of children and the nourishing of the children so that they become actual wards of the state. This is not something that is far from us...it is creeping paralysis upon our Christian society and it must stop!²³

On May 19, 1963, Ford used the issues of slavery and the threat of Russian domination to illustrate his most serious concern, the erosion of freedom, in a sermon entitled "Never in Bondage," based on John 8:33. In discussing the problem of bondage he noted that "The blackest pages in American history are the pages telling of slavery. But slavery was not something new. It is as old as mankind is old."²⁴ Ford claimed that slavery was not the worst kind of bondage, suggesting that many who felt they were free were actually in bondage without recognizing it.

Ford discussed bondage in other parts of the world, such as Indonesia, where he had traveled to visit his sister, a medical missionary. He suggested that most people would assume they could not really know what it would be like to be in bondage but then he warned, "[L]et us not say, 'I do not know how it would be to be a slave.' Remember Jesus said to them, 'The one who commits sins is a slave to sin.'"²⁵ He reminded the congregation that the real danger was being ignorant of bondage.

For Ford, indifference to bondage was worse than ignorance. He pointed out that the German people under Hitler and the people of Russia did not know the meaning of freedom. "Their concept of freedom and ours are poles apart. It can be true of you and me. That which is really bondage we can consider freedom."²⁶

On October 13, 1949, Ford preached at the Shelby-Doches Association on "The Bible Background for Civic Righteousness." In his sermon he asserted that the Bible, not a social gospel, was the only background for civil behavior, because without the Biblical background there could be no real progress and "the whole world will stand in chaos, ignorance and abysmal defeat."²⁷

On May 11, 1947, Ford preached a sermon entitled "Bound By Bigotry." The scripture for the sermon was from John 18:24: "Now Annas had sent him bound unto Caiaphas the high priest." Ford began by stating that "a bigot is one who is unreasonable and blindly attached to a particular creed, church or party; one who is intolerant of opinions which differ from his own."²⁸

On January 16, 1955, Ford's sermon was "Thy Will Be Done – When?" Using the scripture from Matthew 6:10, he began, as he often did, with a question. "Do you really want his will? His will means living according to the highest and strictest standards of righteousness."²⁹ In this sermon Ford

condemned “those fleecing the people, those cutting corners, those selling liquor, those dealing in white prostitution,”³⁰ suggesting that all of these were not doing the will of God.

In a review of Michael Friedland’s *Lift Your Voice Like A Trumpet: White Clergy and the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements, 1954-1973*, Lewis Baldwin of Vanderbilt University suggested that:

civil rights activism and protest against American involvement in Vietnam grew largely out of the efforts of white ministers, priests, and rabbis who refused to separate spirituality from politics and social transformation.

Drawing on the insights of Harvey Cox, Friedland identifies three general camps of clergy: the pietists, who preached a gospel of personal salvation while refusing to participate in protests they considered secular and political; the theological and political conservatives, who felt that religion, like politics, should sanction the status quo; and the liberals, who were personally involved in civil rights and antiwar demonstrations.³¹

In the above categories, William Morris Ford would obviously belong with the pietists who chose to preach a gospel of personal salvation but refused to participate in protests they considered secular and political. Historians such as Friedland have too readily dismissed the impact of those he would label “pietists,” those ministers who chose to preach rather than march, who sincerely believed that the 1925 Confession of Faith accepted by Southern Baptists correctly outlined the means by which to achieve social change. Ford quoted from this confession of faith in a sermon titled “Is There a Social Gospel?” based on Matthew 25:31-46 and Luke 10:25-37, on June 4, 1950, and again on May 24, 1959. Both times he asserted that all Christians were obligated to follow the will of Christ in lives, but he also noted that “All means and methods used in social service for the amelioration of society and the establishment of righteousness among men must finally depend on the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus.”³² Ford concluded by suggesting that there was no social gospel. “Search the New Testament in vain for an example of human welfare without spiritual welfare included. Search in vain also for an example of spiritual welfare without physical welfare included. The two are inseparable. In charity we fail miserably when the gospel is not present. In evangelism we fail miserably when charity is absent.”³³

Pamela Dean has noted that Keith Harper’s *The Quality of Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity, 1890-1920* is part of the ongoing debate among historians of the New South about the influence of the region’s pervasive evangelical religion on social activism and reform.³⁴ Certainly Ford’s sermon on “Is There A Social Gospel?” was a clear and precise statement of what Harper and Storey described as a conservative Social Christianity rather than a more activist Social Gospel.

One cannot read Ford’s sermons and not find the protest against racial prejudice that formed the basis of a segregated society, but he challenged individuals, not groups, to confront the evils of racial prejudice and trusted that

such a confrontation of individual conscience was the preferable way to deal with larger social issues such as segregation rather than the more social activist approach. In "The Conscience of the Mob," a sermon Ford preached on January 15, 1956, based on Luke 23:21, he stated that "Jesus never tried to use the multitude. He worked with individuals. . .because it was there that conscience could do its perfect work."³⁵

This was not a new approach to solving the problems of society. As Winthrop S. Hudson points out in *American Protestantism*, the questioning of politics as a necessary concern of the Christian "began when John Wesley's 'no politics' rule was introduced into the American scene. 'You have nothing to do but save souls,' he told his preachers."³⁶ Hudson also suggests that this belief in the "inner check" was shared by such politicians as Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, who looked forward to the day when the need for laws would be replaced by an "inner check" within each individual that would create a "natural harmony" of civilized men. He admits, however, that evangelicals believed the "inner check" was not the product of the diffusion of knowledge, as did Jefferson, but "the consequence of a conversion experience that freed the individual from bondage to sin...(thus) 'to convert the nation' was to 'reform the nation.'"³⁷

It was this belief in the power of the gospel to change society by changing individuals that was the heart and soul of the message of William Morris Ford and other Southern Baptists. Working for change this way was not as dramatic as marching across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama, but it may have taken as much courage to preach against racial prejudice in the same pulpit for twenty-six years.

In September 1970, the Longview Independent School District was integrated and schools opened without incident.³⁸ In June 1971, Ford retired as minister of the First Baptist Church in Longview. Paul Johnson has stated that what matters in history is not only the things that happen, but the things that do not happen.³⁹ It is these non-incidents that are difficult to evaluate but should not be overlooked. Ford's sermons illustrate that his ministry reflected the Baptist view of what John Storey and Keith Harper have labeled Social Christianity, a view that stressed that meaningful change and true reform could happen only by converting individuals.

NOTES

¹Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1964), p. 136.

²Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism*, p. 140.

³Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism*, p. 143.

⁴John W. Storey, *Texas Baptist Leadership & Social Christianity* (College Station, 1986), p. 117.

⁵Storey, *Texas Baptist*, p. 175.

⁶Bernice Northcutt, *History of the First Baptist Church of Longview, Texas*, Brochure Commemorating the New Sanctuary and Eighty Years of Service, December 16, 1951.

⁷Longview Daily News, June 4, 1945. Hereafter cited as *LDN*.

⁸*LDN*, June 4, 1945.

⁹*LDN*, June 8, 1945.

¹⁰Pamela Dean, review of Keith Harper, *The Quality of Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity, 1890-1920* in *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. XXXI, pp. 899-900.

¹¹Storey, *Texas Baptist*, pp. 4-5.

¹²William Morris Ford, "The Cross Destroys Idealism," 1945, 1964, in *Sermons of William Morris Ford*, First Baptist Church Historical Archives, Longview, Texas. Hereafter referred to as *Sermons*.

¹³Ford, *Sermons*, "The Cross Destroys Race Hatred," 1945, 1955, 1964.

¹⁴Ford, *Sermons*, "The Cross Destroys Race Hatred," 1945, 1955, 1964.

¹⁵*LDN*, September 3, 1954.

¹⁶*LDN*, November 2, 1954.

¹⁷*LDN*, November 15, 1954.

¹⁸*LDN*, September 1, 1954.

¹⁹*LDN*, September 29, 1954.

²⁰*LDN*, October 2, 1954.

²¹*LDN*, October 2, 1954.

²²Ford, *Sermons*, "Strange Miracle," 1962.

²³Ford, *Sermons*, "Strange Miracle," 1962.

²⁴Ford, *Sermons*, "Never in Bondage," 1963.

²⁵Ford, *Sermons*, "Never in Bondage," 1963.

²⁶Ford, *Sermons*, "Never in Bondage," 1963.

²⁷Ford, *Sermons*, "The Bible Background for Civic Righteousness," 1949.

²⁸Ford, *Sermons*, "Bound By Bigotry," 1947.

²⁹Ford, *Sermons*, "Thy Will Be Done – When?," 1955.

³⁰Ford, *Sermons*, "Thy Will Be Done," 1955.

³¹Lewis Baldwin, review of Michael Friedland, *Lift Your Voice Like a Trumpet: White Clergy and the Civil rights and Antiwar Movements, 1954-1973*, in *American Historical Review* (April 1999), pp. 601-602.

³²Ford, *Sermons*, "Is There a Social Gospel?" 1950.

³³Ford, *Sermons*, "Is There a Social Gospel?" 1950.

³⁴Dean, review of *Quality of Mercy* in *Journal of Southern History*, XXXI, pp. 899-900.

³⁵Ford, *Sermons*, "The Conscience of the Mob," 1956.

³⁶Winthrop S. Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago, 1961), p. 73.

³⁷Hudson, *American Protestantism*, p. 73.

³⁸Interview with Ray Hengst by author, Longview, Texas, August 11, 2000.

³⁹Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York, 1999).