

“Church-Related College”: Davidson’s
Hesitation to Integrate Despite Presbyterian
Affiliation

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The debate whether religious institutions should involve themselves in social issues became increasingly relevant for Southern Protestant churches during the Civil Rights Era. One issue that sparked debate within the Presbyterian Church was that of racial integration. The national Presbyterian Church denounced segregation in 1954, yet many southern Presbyterian churches did not agree, and had the autonomy to remain segregated. The lack of compliance from Southerners delayed integration of local churches and religiously affiliated higher education institutions. This essay examines primary sources from newspapers and magazines as well as documents from the Davidson Archives and Special Collections to argue against scholarly conversation depicting Presbyterians in America, particularly in the south, as progressive. Unlike the scholarly narrative that describes the Presbyterian denomination as socially progressive, Davidson College, a Presbyterian affiliated college, delayed the decision to integrate until 1962. The college trailed behind integrated higher education institutions, the Supreme Court, and The Presbyterian Church in the United States because of micro-level debate among students, faculty, and the Board of Trustees.

To contextualize the narrative surrounding racial integration at Davidson, it is important to understand that there are many sects of Presbyterian Churches in the United States. Disagreement regarding the church's involvement in social issues created division throughout history, causing churches to split away from the main Presbyterian Church. Dwyn M. Mounger, a Presbyterian minister from the South, wrote an essay in 1970 titled, "Racial Attitudes in the Presbyterian Church in the United States." In this essay he explains that by the time the conversation regarding integration came up within the national Church, there were already multiple Presbyterian Churches which each had different racial attitudes and were divided by geographic regions in the United States. The Presbyterian Church of the United States of

America (PCUSA) held a General Assembly in 1861 that motivated the formation of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS). The PCUS was confined to the southern region and believed that PCUSA was too concerned with social and political issues. However, PCUS began to have its own debate almost one hundred years later when racial integration became a more relevant social issue. Mounger notes that it is “surprising” to see that “southern Presbyterians became disenchanted” with the doctrine that they had originally united upon to break away and begin their own, more conservative church.¹

Following World War II, the PCUS was forced to make decisions on segregation, as a surge of African American soldiers were returning home from war.² Mounger explains how during this period, PCUS was split in two sides of debate. The first side, which he calls, “Preservers,” were “largely opposed to church pronouncements on major social issues, and they tended to favor the general status quo in race relations.” In contrast, the other group, “Reformers,” “expressed increased concern for the problems of society, criticized the Negro-white status quo, and called for major changes in it.”³ By 1943, eight black congregations were led by white presbyteries and 38 black congregations had their own governing bodies, yet still received full representation in the General Assembly.⁴ However, the racial attitudes were highly

¹ Dwyn M. Mounger, “Racial Attitudes in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1944- 1954,” *Journal of Presbyterian History (1962-1985)* 48 (1): (1970) 39.

² Mounger, “Racial Attitudes,” 52.

³ Mounger, “Racial Attitudes,” 39.

⁴ Mounger, “Racial Attitudes,” 38.

“paternalistic” across the board.⁵ Reformers supported church involvement in social change but agreed with most Preserver attitudes that change must come gradually. The transition away from discriminatory practices would be necessarily slow in pace and segregation should not be completely exterminated.⁶ Even though reformer arguments were moderate, Mounger emphasizes the importance that they were even on the PCUS agenda, since no other Southern Protestant denomination was seriously considering reformer ideologies at this time.⁷

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States decided in *Brown v. Board* that segregation was inherently unequal. Just ten days later, on May 27th, 1954, two reports on segregation from the Division on Christian Relations were presented at the PCUS General Assembly in Montreat, NC which would result in an official stance from the Church in favor of integration. Mounger believes that it is significant that one of these reports was actually written before the Supreme Court Decision, and therefore, was not influenced by this judicial outcome. It was this report, titled “The Church and Segregation” that directly insisted that PCUS encourage colleges and universities to open their doors to African Americans.⁸ While debate ensued from the Preservers at the meeting, the General Assembly voted to adopt both of these resolutions. Mounger ends his essay as a success story, arguing that Preservers did not react extremely negatively to the General Assembly’s decision and that it was courageous for PCUS to have been the first Protestant group in the South to condemn segregation.

⁵ Mounger, “Racial Attitudes,” 42-43.

⁶ Mounger, “Racial Attitudes,” 56.

⁷ Mounger, “Racial Attitudes,” 68.

⁸ Mounger, “Racial Attitudes,” 63.

Other scholars disagree with this optimistic portrayal of the Montreat General Assembly and question the impact this decision actually had on race relations. Written thirty years after Mounger's text, Courtney Louise Tollison's "Moral imperative and financial practicality: Desegregation of South Carolina's denominationally affiliated colleges and universities" describes the outcome of the General Assembly meeting as a suggestion rather than edict to the PCUS churches, as many synods disagreed with the anti-segregation stance of the Church. Published in 1994, Joel L. Avis' book, *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983* writes that the General Assembly of 1954 "had been directed in large part at the trustees and directors of Presbyterian colleges in the hopes they would adopt policies that eliminated race as a factor for admission."⁹ The Presbyterian Church is a Protestant denomination with a great focus on education, which is why many colleges were founded by this church and hold ties to Presbyterianism. Even after all the PCUS seminaries had integration policies in 1951, the General Assembly meeting of 1954 was needed to urge colleges and universities to integrate.

Tollison later looks at how religious affiliation affected decisions on race, arguing that often political and financial threats were stronger motivators than moral obligations. One of the South Carolina schools that Tollison specifically investigates is Presbyterian College. In contrast to public universities which were more directly tied to government regulations regarding racial discrimination, Presbyterian College is a private, Presbyterian affiliated institution. Thus, much like other private colleges, a court order following the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forced Presbyterian College to integrate. These court orders often threatened denial of government

⁹ Joel L. Avis, "Opening Closed Doors," in *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946 to 1983* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 90.

funds if the school did not comply with the Civil Rights Act.¹⁰ Despite the Presbyterian Church's stance in favor of integration, Presbyterian College operated outside of the constraints of their affiliation and did not integrate until forced by the US Government.¹¹

Tollison is supported by Avis who similarly describes how colleges that did not immediately integrate faced pressure from the federal government more than the Church, and eventually integrated due to financial threats. Avis specifically uses Davidson College in North Carolina as an example of a school that hesitated to integrate. Avis argues that Davidson "had to overcome significant opposition from both in the student body and among alumni" but that "many hailed the decision as long overdue when it finally came in 1962".¹² What motivated Davidson, "one of the oldest and most prestigious of the denominational colleges" to integrate?¹³ How does the conversation between Mounger, Heuser, Tollison, and Avis regarding integration, the Presbyterian Church, and the U.S Government manifest at Davidson College? Did Davidson's Presbyterian affiliation and ideology extend to their practices as an institution?

I will analyze primary sources to investigate how perspectives on desegregation from southern universities, the federal government, and especially the Presbyterian Church in the United States manifested in Davidson College's decision to integrate its campus in 1962. I focus

¹⁰ Courtney Louise Tollison, "Moral Imperative and Financial Practicality: Desegregation of South Carolina's Denominationally Affiliated Colleges and Universities" (Columbia, South Carolina, University of South Carolina, 2003), 191.

¹¹ Tollison, "Moral Imperative and Financial Practicality," 235.

¹² Avis, "Opening Closed Doors," 90.

¹³ Avis, "Opening Closed Doors," 90.

my analysis on articles from secular and Presbyterian magazines and newspapers, articles from Davidson College's student-run newspaper, *The Davidsonian*, and an interview with Davidson President D. Grier Martin to study Davidson's decision to integrate in relation to the Presbyterian Church. Davidson was one of the first private southern colleges to integrate, but its hesitation to integrate despite Presbyterian affiliation was due to remaining tension in the present school community. Pushback from the town, alumni, students, and Board of Trustees delayed integration at Davidson, despite its connections to the Presbyterian Church in the United States. There was a great discrepancy between the church's official stance and how these policies were practiced locally. While the Presbyterian Church called for integration, institutional changes on the ground floor were slower, as seen in the business practices in the town of Davidson, the practices of Churches in the Charlotte area, and in Davidson College's admissions policies.¹⁴

In 1957, John J. O'Connor, a professor at Georgetown University and a Catholic speaker in favor of racial integration visited several institutions in North Carolina and wrote an article for the Catholic World Magazine to document his experience. O'Connor described his "prejudice" against Protestants as racists, stating that among Northern Catholics, a common judgement is that

¹⁴ For more about local businesses' negative response to integration at Davison College, see "'Thereby Hangs a Tale': The Winding Path to Integration at Davidson" *Around the D*, Davidson College Archives and Special Collections Blog (2016).

<https://davidsonarchivesandspecialcollections.org/aroundthed/thereby-hangs-a-tale-the-winding-path-to-integration-at-davidson/>

Protestantism “spawned racism”.¹⁵ In admitting his stereotypical attitude towards Protestants, O’Connor details how his perspective shifted after his trip to North Carolina. In his article, O’Connor remarks that he was apprehensive to speak in front of 800 white Protestant young men at Davidson College. However, the students enthusiastically ask questions following his lectures.¹⁶ Given the students’ positive response to his lecture, O’Connor questions how a Presbyterian Church in Asheville could integrate, but not this Presbyterian college just outside Charlotte.¹⁷

While historical racial injustice occurred throughout the United States, Southern Churches in particular had a much more complex relationship with race than their northern counterparts. We see this history linger today, and O’Connor saw it especially on his visit to North Carolina when he compared the racial attitudes in each US region. While he is happily surprised by both the kindness of Protestants he interacts with on his trip as well as the curiosity and open-mindedness of the student body of Davidson College, the lack of progress in institutional integration leaves O’Connor confused. He compares this lag to the Catholic Church’s experience, as Catholic colleges took longer to catch up to the Vatican’s pro-integration stance. O’Connor is hopeful that “the south will eventually work out a practical solution” like the Catholic Churches did.¹⁸ The open-mindedness of Davidson’s students towards integration begins to change O’Connor’s conception of Protestants. However, O’Connor notes

¹⁵ John J. O’Connor, “Prejudice in North Carolina,” *Catholic World*, (1957), 127.

¹⁶ O’Connor, “Prejudice in North Carolina,” 129.

¹⁷ O’Connor, “Prejudice in North Carolina,” 129.

¹⁸ O’Connor, “Prejudice in North Carolina,” 131.

that “it is probable that I encountered only ‘do-gooder’ Protestants who are not part of today’s power structure in the South.”¹⁹ While O’Connor’s experience in North Carolina was overall welcoming, he was only exposed to one side of the debate.

Archival evidence produced by Davidson College exposes the other side of the debate, revealing how widespread opposition to integrate was among both faculty and students at Davidson. The school’s student-run newspaper, *The Davidsonian*, had a “Trustee Special” published in 1960 in preparation for the Board of Trustees’ annual business meeting. This meeting brought up the topic of changing admissions policies to accept African American students. This was a particularly contentious topic since the Board had decided not to integrate in their meeting the previous year.²⁰

Faculty at the college often refrained from commenting on the matter, but those who did revealed differing opinions on integration. In the article, “Pall of Silence Enshrouds Faculty, Administration” student reporters reveal that when asked about integrating the college, faculty members left no comment, as they wanted to stay out of the controversy until after the Board’s meeting. Some staff members spoke up on the topic, with one woman stating that she does “not think that integration would be a happy thing at present.” Another staff member re-emphasized that “a private institution can exclude anyone that it wants.” The general silence from faculty reveals the power structure at Davidson, as the staff understand that it is ultimately the Board of Trustees’ decision to integrate the college. Even so, some passionate professors were not in

¹⁹ O’Connor, “Prejudice in North Carolina,” 131.

²⁰ *Davidsonian* Editor, “Education Too Valuable to Ignore,” *Davidsonian: Trustee Special* (Davidson, North Carolina) February 16, 1960, 2.

agreement with the Trustee's previous statement against integration, often citing the fact that Davidson is a "church related" school. One professor noted that they believe that "the Church should take the lead," indicating that Davidson should follow PCUS' stance against segregation. Another professor felt that "Christians should manifest in society the same acceptance of people that God has shown." A professor powerfully states that "this is not a racial issue. It is a human one." It is clear that while some members of Davidson's faculty sided with the Presbyterian Church and thus, felt the college should integrate, others did not believe it would be a smart decision or stayed silent on the matter.²¹

In terms of student opinion, a campus poll in the same Davidsonian Trustee Issue resulted in almost a 50-50 split on the decision, with 297 students against integrating and 303 students believing that the school should integrate either at the present or in the future.²² It is noted in the article that there were reports of ballot-stuffing and several complaints that the poll was not administered fairly, thus creating inaccurate results.²³ It is not clear which side of the debate may have been the cause of the ballot stuffing, but this accusation shows the immense importance of this decision and how passionate students were about integration. One particularly passionate student letter to *The Davidsonian* harshly criticizes Davidson, citing the Supreme Court and Presbyterian Church as evidence against the Board of Trustees' 1957 statement that "it is not in

²¹ Tom Colvin and Dick Smith, "Pall of Silence Enshrouds Faculty, Administration," *Davidsonian*, (1960): 1.

²² Tom Colvin and Dick Smith, "Student Poll Reveals Views on Segregation," *Davidsonian*, (1960): 1.

²³ Larry Wells, "Student Discredits Race Poll," *Davidsonian*, (1960): 2.

the best interest of Davidson College to admit Negroes at this time.”²⁴ A thought-provoking drawing of a tablet with the ten commandments is featured on the last page. The final commandment on the tablet reads, “Thou shalt love thy white neighbor as thyself”.²⁵ The graphic puts a twist on the traditional commandment to “love thy neighbor,” directly calling out Davidson for its hypocrisy as a Presbyterian-affiliated college that had yet to integrate.

Davidson College finally admitted its first black student in 1962 under college President, Dr. D. Grier Martin. As the figurehead that represented the college’s views, Martin gave an interview in 1964 where he answered questions regarding the change in admissions policy. Particularly interesting is that when Davidson chose to integrate, they admitted Benoit Nzengu, son of a Presbyterian Minister in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who Davidson alums and Presbyterian Missionaries had taught.²⁶ Following Nzengu, they admitted a second Congolese student, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, illuminating the relation between the Church and Davidson.²⁷ Martin was asked, “If I have it straight, so far the first two Negroes are not from the south, but from the Congo in Africa?” Martin responds that the decision to admit Nzengu and Nzongola was the result of the school’s “connection” to alumni in Africa, and that Davidson did

²⁴ Dick Smith, “Education too Valuable to Ignore,” *Davidsonian*, (1960): 2.

²⁵ Rodding Ackerman, “Policy Decision,” *Davidsonian*, (1960): 2.

²⁶ It is unclear from the archival description who exactly is interviewing Martin; however, conversation regarding the Duke Endowment leads to speculation that it may be a representative of this organization.

²⁷ Interview Transcript, [1964], Box 1, Folder 10, David Grier Martin Collection, Davidson Archives and Special Collections at Davidson College, Davidson, NC, 46.

not have any applicants from America.²⁸ While Davidson did integrate with the admission of the two Congolese students, this was not as a triumphant win in favor of creating a more socially progressive college. The decision was motivated by alumni networking, Presbyterian missionary connections, and effectively ignored African American students. Nzengu and Nzongola's acceptance was a calculated selection, revealing Davidson's reluctance towards integration. When the interviewer reiterates that Davidson had no previous African American students, Grier reveals that four years prior, they actually had an applicant who would "have been the perfect one to start with because he wanted to commute." However, it was the lack of action from the trustees that held them back from accepting this applicant.²⁹ The debate among students, faculty, and even Martin's own opinions were in the hands of the Board of Trustees, who are ultimately responsible for the delay to integrate.

In the interview, Martin uses careful language in describing the Board's eventual decision to integrate. Statements like "reaffirmed" their stance, acceptance of "qualified" students, and referring to Davidson as a "church related college" create a well-crafted and carefully communicated narrative that emphasizes cautious consideration as well as moderate views.³⁰ Two years after the Nzengu's acceptance, the first two African American students were granted admission to the college.³¹ Martin blames the lack of African American students who actually applied to Davidson as the reason why the college did not have any African Americans until

²⁸ Martin, Interview, 45.

²⁹ Martin, Interview, 46.

³⁰ Martin, Interview, 44, 47, 39.

³¹ Martin, Interview, 47.

1964. He says that “Negro students who are qualified” often choose to attend prestigious northern institutions like Yale or Princeton because of the schools’ “ample college funds” which “lure” them into attending.³² The excuse that northern institutions had larger endowments is a deflection of the racism that differentiated northern colleges from southern schools. Davidson College’s actions aligned with the racism prevalent its southern location, rather than the PCUS church, which had taken a progressive stance on race in accordance with their Christian beliefs.

In recounting the history of integration in the south, the Presbyterian Church is seen as taking early action in favor of racial equality. However, emphasizing the Church’s official stance on integration ignores the lack of compliance by local Presbyterian institutions. When questioning why a church-related college did not integrate, we forget that the PCUS’s decision was not strictly enforced, which allowed for a gap between doctrine and practice. Just a year before Davidson had accepted its first African American students in 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. was writing a letter from a Birmingham Jail in response to clergymen. These church officials asked King to stop demonstrating and instead participate in “honest and open negotiation.”³³ One of the men who signed this letter to King was Presbyterian clergyman, Edward V. Ramage, who

³² Martin, Interview, 47.

³³ Signed by C.C.J Carpenter, Joseph A. Durick, Milton L. Grafman, Paul Hardin, Nolan B. Harmon, George M. Murray, Edward V. Ramage, and Earl Stallings, “Letter to Martin Luther King Jr” April 16, 1963.

attended Davidson College for some years.³⁴ King responded to the letter, criticizing the “white moderate,” emphasizing that peaceful protest creates “necessary tension” and stating that “lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”³⁵ While Davidson college did eventually integrate, it did so with the same dangerously moderate view that King describes in his letter. Looking back at the college’s history in relation to its church-ties is a necessary perspective in fully understanding the steps to integrate. While Davidson has made great strides in progress regarding social issues, racial attitudes are still highly relevant to campus conversation, as Davidson’s identity as a Southern Presbyterian and originally all-white college lingers today.

³⁴ Jonathan S. Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 81.

³⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” April 12, 1963.

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