

NEW HOPE:
A STORY OF RELIGION AND RACE DURING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

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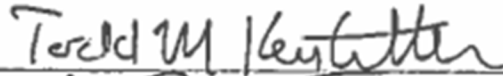
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For the AddRan College of Arts and Sciences

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	i
Table of Contents	ii
Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: “The Lord has Greatly Blessed Us”	19
Chapter 2: “The Right hand of Fellowship”	43
Chapter 3: “For the Benefit for the Coloured Population”	73
Chapter 4: “Acceding to . . . The Confederate States”	91
Chapter 5: “Recently Disturbed in their Worship”	119
Chapter 6: “Owing to the Peculiar State of the Country”	142
Chapter 7: A New Hope	167
Conclusion	196
Bibliography	204
Vita	

ABSTRACT**NEW HOPE: A STORY OF RELIGION AND RACE
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by
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Ph.D. in History, 2022, Texas Christian University

Professor Steven Woodworth, Ph.D.

This dissertation examines the relationship between religion and race during the era of the American Civil War by tracing the story of New Hope Baptist Church of Waco, Texas. This African American Baptist church originally formed as a separate service of First Baptist Church of Waco in the decade before the Civil War, grew within this context despite adversity, and eventually separated to create an independent congregation in the wake of the Civil War. The research demonstrates that, in contrast to much of the literature that discusses the development of African American religion, at least some development of the “Black Church” took place within white dominated churches. Despite the general understanding of the era, study of First Baptist Church reveals that the idea that enslaved African Americans only began to gain some religious autonomy after emancipation is not true in all southern churches. Additionally, the story of New Hope also shows that although national events effect society, local action is essential in making societal progress and that well-meaning people can move forward even amid extreme adversity.

Introduction

In June of 1859, an enslaved African American named Stephen Cobb came before the joint conference¹ of First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas, seeking membership into the congregation. After he testified to “his experience of grace,” the church members accepted him into the body of the church noting that he was “sound and orthodox in the faith.”² Immediately after the meeting adjourned, the church reconvened at the river where Solomon G. O’Bryan, the pastor of the church, baptized Stephen fulfilling the last requirement for his full membership. Stephen was not unique in his admittance to the membership. Over the course of the 1850s, numerous people both Black and white were added to the roles of the church through this very process. What is unique about Stephen Cobb is that in a mere seven years, he went from being a lay African American member of the congregation to the pastor of a free and independent church for African American Baptists called New Hope Baptist Church. At the time of his own baptism, he undoubtedly could not have foreseen this outcome.

What follows is not just the story of Stephen Cobb; it is the story of a community. This community grew despite the inequality that was endemic throughout society and in the church itself. Ultimately, the American Civil War altered the landscape of First Baptist Church and made possible a division of the Baptist churches in the Waco area. This dissertation traces the story of New Hope Baptist Church from its inception as a separate service of First Baptist

¹ In the context of nineteenth-century Baptist churches, the term “church conference” generally refers to a meeting of the members of the church to address church business including membership and discipline issues. This is similar to business meetings in modern Baptist churches. To refer to meetings of several churches, the term “regional conference” or “state conference” can be used. These multi church meetings may also be referred to as conventions.

² First Baptist Church Waco, *First Baptist Church Minute Book A*. Collection of Church Records, First Baptist Church Archive, Waco, TX, 118.

Church, to its constitution as an independent congregation in the wake of the Civil War.

Therefore, the project must be a community study in the vein of other surveys of small towns which have become notable since the 1970s. Like other focused studies, the examination of one small community cannot be used to prove broader trends of the American Civil War era, but it can open a window into that world and provide a point of comparison to generally accepted understandings of the period.

The most direct point of contrast that this study draws with current assumptions about the Antebellum and Civil War world concerns the development of the “Black Church.”³ Most of the current literature focuses on the growth of the “Black Church” in the antebellum South through study of secret meetings of enslaved people of color or the few free African American Churches that existed in the established cities on the eastern side of the region. While current scholarship admits that many African Americans worshiped in white dominated congregations (often in the back or balcony), it discounts this activity as a meaningful factor in the development of African American Christianity. This case study departs from the current literature by centering the focus on African Americans within First Baptist Church of Waco Texas and demonstrating that the growth of the “Black Church” could and (in the case of Waco) did occur within white dominated congregations.

Study of the Waco Baptists shines a light on the most dominant (and sometimes tragic) issues of the Civil War era. Naturally, the Waco churches elicit consideration of religious practice, doctrine, and response to political issues. In many ways, the Baptists of the nineteenth century were unique among the protestant denominations of the era, but they nevertheless

³ The term “Black Church” is used here in the same sense that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. uses it in his work *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song*.

demonstrate the tremendous importance of Christianity in the 1800s and in the case of the Waco churches, the general views of Southern Christians during the period. Perhaps even more importantly, study of First Baptist Church and New Hope Baptist Church also demands an examination of the role of race in society. The tremendous struggle with racism that still exists in the twenty first century makes a study of this period both timely and necessary. Ultimately, the project reminds readers that while forward thinking people and communities can make great progress, those gains can also slip away if not constantly guarded. Because of the interconnected nature of the topics, the intersection of religion and race, therefore, forms the heart of this narrative.

The story of the Waco Baptists demonstrates that progress can be made in the face of adversity. In the span of fifteen years, the African American members of First Baptist went from unequal members of a white-dominated congregation to members of their own independent church. This transition obviously relied on national events such as emancipation, but it was also built from the actions of local people. The growth of an independent church did not begin in 1865. In reality, the people of color within First Baptist had been moving toward independence since the early 1850s. Ultimately, this is a story of their actions without which, there would be no New Hope Baptist Church. This demonstrates that national movements are important, but it is local activity at the community level which most directly effects change in people's daily lives.

This narrative is also about the white members of First Baptist. It reminds modern readers that people can be sincere, but still be sincerely wrong. It is easy to assign terrible motives to historical figures who abuse authority, but sometimes harmful actions can be driven by positive motives. The white members of First Baptist Church were very much a product of

their time and place. Yet eventually, they supported the advancement of the African American community. Certainly, this support did not come easily, nor was it uniform from all white members. As will be seen, some of this resistance likely stemmed from outside pressure from the community at large, reminding readers that sometimes even well-meaning people are not immune from socio-political pressure.

Waco is an excellent case study of these themes for a couple of reasons. First, while First Baptist Church was not unique in the fact that its African American members left to form their own church in the wake of the American Civil War, this course transpired more quickly than it did in other churches across Texas or the wider South. Indeed, some sources claim that New Hope was the First Independent African American Baptist church in Texas.⁴ Historically, First Baptist can be viewed as a model of the effects of emancipation on denominational organizations. Second, even in the 1860s, First Baptist Waco was a prominent church among Texas Baptists which exerted influence over the other Baptist churches in the region and state denominational proceedings. By the late-nineteenth century, it was arguably the most prominent Baptist Church in the state. After its founding, New Hope Baptist Church also became very influential particularly in the field of music. The ripple effect of the story of New Hope's founding echoes even to the present day.

The study is divided into seven chapters that span the decade and a half from the initial creation of First Baptist Church in 1851 to the formation of New Hope Baptist Church in 1866. Within this timeframe, the chapters fall into two main periods with the first three centered in the 1850s and the latter four covering the years of the American Civil War. While some of the

⁴ Avenue L Missionary Baptist Church operating under First Baptist Church of Galveston also gained its independence in the wake of the American Civil War.

chapters are topical and share the same chronological space, clear progression exists over the course of the narrative through several keystone chapters.

The text commences with an analysis of First Baptist church through an examination of the congregation's foundational documents and the context in which the original members wrote them. This chapter highlights many key aspects of Baptist doctrine and practice in mid-nineteenth century America and how (at least on paper) First Baptist implemented those ideas and actions. This chapter also begins to clearly establish major differences in the lived experiences of African American Baptists and foreshadows how those differences would play out in actual practice within First Baptist Church.

The second chapter delves into the issue of fellowship in First Baptist which encompasses the linked issues of membership and church discipline. While many modern churches do not place as much significance on these issues, they were central in nineteenth-century Baptist churches. This chapter considers not only who comprised the membership of First Baptist but also how they became members and maintained good standing with the church. This analysis inherently allows for comparison to other antebellum churches as well as to modern practices. Even more importantly for the present study, it offers the first excellent point of comparison between the white and black members of the congregation. As will be seen, the issue of fellowship eventually became an organization point around which the nascent African American congregation formed.

The issue of leadership and authority, another key point of comparison between the white and Black communities within First Baptist Church serves as the central focus of chapter three. Within the church, several key positions were dominated by the white members of the congregation including the leading roles of pastor and elder. However, this does not mean that

Black Baptists did not exercise any leadership within the church. In fact, this chapter demonstrates that African Americans began to use what authority they had to press for larger shares of leadership within the church over the course of the 1850s. Most notably, they used the vehicle of their own meetings and related conferences to push the white congregation to approve Black deacons and eventually Black preachers (though critically at this stage, not Black elders). This growth in African American leadership within the church laid the groundwork for conflict during the war years and eventual ecclesiastical independence.

Chapter four carries the narrative forward into the 1860s by describing the coming of the American Civil War. The nature of this study means that the chapter focuses primarily on the wartime experiences of the members of First Baptist Church within the broader context of Waco's involvement in the conflict. As is revealed, the war had a direct impact in the lives of several important members of First Baptist and therefore First Baptist as a whole. This chapter traces secession in Texas through the departure and return of key leaders in the community.

The fifth chapter considers the issues of leadership and authority in the church. By the advent of the American Civil War, the African American members of First Baptist Church were operating semi-autonomously. While they were still considered to be under the authority of the white elders of the church and subject to the white dominated church conference, they had their own service, deacons, and even preachers. During the war years, the white portion of the congregation attempted to tighten its control over the African Americans even while suffering significant leadership struggles of its own. This chapter describe the conflict between the two halves of the church and analyzes the main sources of tension between the two groups.

The penultimate chapter of the study returns to the ideas of chapter two, by revisiting the issues of membership and discipline. During this time, both concepts became more difficult as

populations shifted due to the war. Waco experienced the loss of many white men who joined the Confederate Army and an influx of refugees and enslaved African Americans who sought membership into the congregation. How the church handled these issues (particularly in comparison to the 1850s) does much to demonstrate the impact of the war on both church practices and the role of race within the church.

In the final chapter, the narrative carries the study to its conclusion in the form of an independent African American church named New Hope Baptist Church. This event in 1866 (about a year after the end of the Civil War) is a natural climax for the story of the African American members of First Baptist Church, but not one they would have likely seen coming. This chapter examines both the decision to leave and the process of effecting it. Of course, like preceding chapters, it analyzes this event within the broader regional and national context of the end of slavery that occurred because of the Civil War. Naturally, the end of this study is also only the beginning of the full story of New Hope Baptist Church; therefore, the final chapter is followed by a brief conclusion that looks toward the future of the church while also bringing into focus the themes and lessons of its birth.

As with any historical study, the success of this project rests on the strength and breadth of available primary sources. Thankfully, First Baptist Church of Waco has maintained minute books since the founding of the church in the 1850s. These minutes are accessible for research and include information about the white congregation and the enslaved African Americans who held their own services as part of the church. For the current project, the minutes from the church's founding through the 1870s are critical. In fact, they form the primary backbone of the research. It may be difficult for some readers to envision church meeting minutes as being a useful source, but when studied with a keen eye, they reveal much about both religion and race

relations. One entry alone may not be telling, but numerous entries taken together can provide a compelling portrait.

In addition to the church records, a collection of Pastor Rufus C. Burleson's letters and other papers also exists and is currently held at the Texas Collection at Baylor University. Although this collection includes no letters from the war years, it houses numerous documents from before and after the conflict. The Texas Collection also harbors the records of New Hope Baptist Church. Although this collection contains only limited documents from the 1860s, it offers a wealth of information on the 1870s and beyond. This means that while the early chapters of the work will be more reliant of the records of First Baptist Church, the last chapter will benefit from both sets of documents. In addition to church records and pastoral letters, many other primary documents will also contribute to the final form of this research project. Notably, censuses and other demographic data will be necessary to flesh out who was living in Waco and where they lived in relation to the church.

As important as primary sources are, every work of history stands on the shoulders of and interacts with the works which have come before, and this text is no exception. Although no author has written a scholarly book on subject of the churches in Waco, Texas, any effort to address the topic intersects with a web of varied historiographies and influences including studies of the Civil War and Reconstruction, studies of American Religion, studies of African American History and Religion, and studies on Texas History. While works drawn from all of these fields form a foundation for this study, the present work makes its most direct intervention in the historiography of African American Religion.

Systematic consideration of African American religion has developed relatively recently, but the roots of the field are intertwined with study of African American history more broadly.

Obviously, landmark works such as Kenneth M. Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Anti-Bellum South* and Eugene Genovese's *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* have formed the basis for much that has developed since. Stampp's early work was one of the first to systematically analyze American slavery from a modern perspective. He drew on recent advances in human sciences to write from the understanding that African Americans and white Americans are (and were during the antebellum era) inherently the same. This shift in understanding allowed his analysis to begin a conversation about the slaves as people instead of simply as an abstract category of property.⁵ Genovese built on this narrative by focusing on the slaves themselves. He argues that they maintained their dignity and humanity in the face of great adversity. While much of their lives was out of their control, they seized opportunities to make their own decisions and carve out their own culture. His book was also one of the first scholarly works to directly consider the development of African American religion as a key feature of African American culture.⁶ As with many studies that followed him, Genovese focused mostly on clandestine meetings and other actions of enslaved African Americans outside of white institutions.⁷

While these early works mentioned African American religion, it was not until the 1970s that scholars began to devote entire works to the subject with a pioneer in this regard being *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* by Albert J. Raboteau. Originally

⁵ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Originally published in 1956.

⁶ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998). Originally published in 1972.

⁷ While many other works trace the development of African American culture, the two above are specifically mentioned, because they set the narrative that many other works followed. The central thesis of this dissertation directly interacts with the narrative which can be traced back to the about others particularly Eugene Genovese.

published in 1978 with an updated edition in 2004, this work traces the development of religion within the community of enslaved African Americans from the colonial era through the American Civil War. As the title suggests, Raboteau focuses on the activities of enslaved Africans and their Afro-American descendants. The text accounts for white influence in sharing Christianity with the enslaved population and allows that African Americans did attend white dominated churches, but ultimately argues: “Nevertheless, at the core of the slaves’ religion was a private place, represented by the cabin room, the overturned pot, the prayin’ ground, and the ‘hush harbor.’ This is the place the slave kept his own.”⁸ At the heart of *Slave Religion* is the idea that while African American religion developed in conversation with white Christianity, its purest expression was found outside of organized white dominated churches.⁹

This understanding of the development of African American Christianity, has become accepted within the field and finds expression to this day. Two recent examples are Raphael Warnock’s *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety & Public Witness* and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Black Church: This is our Story, This is Our Song* published in 2014 and 2021 respectively. In *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, Warnock focuses on the theology of Black Churches in the United States basing his ideas on a historical framework that he lays out early in his work. In his four-stage process of development, Warnock suggests that the first step (which he calls Christianization) witnessed Afro-Americans reject white Christianity in

⁸ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 219.

⁹ Another important work that echoes the idea that secret meetings were central to the development of the Black Church is Lawrence W. Levin, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 41. This work uses folk music as a primary vehicle to discuss the development of Black Thought noting that in the antebellum era, much of this creation took place in secret meetings.

favor of their own version of the religion. He further uses a quotation that had previously been used by Raboteau to sum up his contention that Black Theology developed outside of (and in many ways in opposition to) organized white dominated churches.¹⁰ Although his book is not a history per se, it demonstrates the breadth of acceptance of the view that the development of the Black Church occurred outside of white churches.

In *The Black Church*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. offers the most recent narrative of the development of African American Christianity from the colonial era to the present. Like Warnock, Gates draws heavily from Raboteau as he describes the origins of the “Black Church.” Within the first chapter of his book, Gates argues that the root of African American Religion was a merging of Christianity with various religious practices from Africa including Islam which occurred in the secret meetings held by enslaved African Americans. Gates even goes as far as stating, “The invisible institution—this was the real Black Church: people who couldn’t read memorizing passages from the King James Bible, interpreting it for themselves, and creating sermons.”¹¹ Foundational to *The Black Church* is the idea that true African American religion developed from the “invisible institution,” but not other strands of Black Christianity in the Antebellum era.

This dissertation intervenes in the historiography of the Black Church, not by discounting the traditional understanding of the development of African American religion, but by offering another path of development alongside the traditional narrative. Scholarship on the importance of the “invisible institution” is convincing, but describing it as the “real” Black Church discounts

¹⁰ Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety & Public Witness* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 22-26.

¹¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), 39-40.

other aspects of the development of African American Christianity, namely the development which occurred within white dominated congregations. The present study of the growth of New Hope Baptist Church within First Baptist Church of Waco demonstrates that the “invisible institution” was not the only meaningful avenue of development for the Black Church. As a case study of a particular community, this dissertation cannot prove the importance of this avenue across the entire South or even all of Texas. It may well be that the case of First Baptist Waco is an exception that proves the rule of the traditional understanding. While that is for future broader studies to decide, even if it does prove to be an exception to general trends, it still proves that the common understanding is not absolute. Ultimately, at least in the case of First Baptist, the Black Church not only found expression within the “invisible institution” but also in the very visible organized church structures of the period.

In addition to obvious links to both primary and secondary sources, “A New Hope” also benefits from other histories which are seemingly unrelated in content. Most notably are works which offer methodological or stylistic inspiration. The most prominent of these is *A Midwife’s Tale* by Laura Thatcher Ulrich. Like that text, this study draws heavily from a primary source that easily could be overlooked by historians. In the case of Ulrich’s study, the diary of a midwife named Martha Ballard serves as the central primary source. Although this journal was accessible, many researchers before Ulrich had overlooked it. The minutes from First Baptist Church and New Hope Baptist Church are similar to Ballard’s diary. On the surface, they may seem mundane and unhelpful, but with careful consideration, they offer tremendous insight into individual people and the communities they formed.

As community is a central focus of this study, many works which focus on local communities also serve as inspiration. Studies of small local communities such as Kenneth

Lockridge's *A New England Town* and Suzanne Lebsock's *The Free Women of Petersburg* offer excellent examples. In some ways, the present study is even more specific than these works, while considering First Baptist Church and New Hope Baptist Church, one must keep them in context of the broader community of Waco. For this reason, consideration of community studies like those of Lockridge and Lebsock are particularly helpful, because they demonstrate that a study of a small community can serve as a good point of reference for broader investigation of an era or region. Like these works did with their subjects, this dissertation seeks to place the churches and the communities they served in the broader context of the South.

Before delving into the story of First Baptist Church, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of its foundation and early history. After being established at the beginning of the 1850s, the town of Waco quickly grew into a flourishing community. The growing population of Waco included people of various Christian denominations including some Baptists, four of whom joined to form a Baptist congregation. The quartet included three men, James C. Johnson, George Holman, and Noah Woods, and one woman, Malita Johnson.¹² Although all of them were already Baptists, none of the men were elders in the Baptist Church; therefore, they did not have the authority to officially form a new church body. The original members of First Baptist church coalesced around the leadership of a missionary named Noah T. Byars. Before surrendering to ministry, he had worked as a blacksmith during the pivotal years of the Texas independence movement.¹³ Although he was a recently ordained minister, he had been a Baptist in Washington on the Brazos/Independence region of Texas which had become the center of

¹² First Baptist Church Waco, *First Baptist Church Minute Book A*. Collection of Church Records, First Baptist Church Archive, Waco, TX., 3.

¹³ Robert Andrew Baker, *The Blossoming Desert: A Concise History of Texas Baptists* (Waco: Word Books. 1970), 23.

Baptist influence in the new country. Byars answered the call for missionaries to the central region of Texas and set out for McClennan County in 1851. Upon arrival, he found some Baptists scattered over the area, but no established church.¹⁴ The only church in Waco at the time was the Methodist congregation. Although it appears that several individuals may have met previously to discuss the formation of a church, the official first meeting of First Baptist Church took place on Saturday, May 31, 1851.¹⁵ Noah Byars preached and then called for individuals to present themselves for membership and announced the new church as “the first Baptist church at Waco.”¹⁶

The following Sunday, the congregation voted to elect Noah T. Byars as the pastor of the church for the rest of the year.¹⁷ He then stayed on to serve the congregation for the following two years as well. After that, the church was established and stable and he went out to form another new church. By the end of his missionary ministry, he had planted more than sixty new churches.¹⁸ His absence did not leave the community bereft of leadership. In 1854, another Baptist elder named Solomon G. O’Bryan answered the call to serve First Baptist. He had studied at Wake Forrest and had moved to Texas in the 1840s where he pastored the Baptist Church at Independence.¹⁹ After moving to Waco, he served as the pastor through 1859, contributing greatly to the development of the congregation. Among other notable initiatives, O’Bryan organized a campaign to raise funds for a church building so the congregation could meet every week instead of only once a month. As the pastor of First Baptist, Rev. O’Bryan also

¹⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 3.

¹⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 3.

¹⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 3.

¹⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 3.

¹⁸ James L. Walker, *History of the Waco Baptist Association* (Waco: Byrne-Hill Print. House. 1897), 255

¹⁹ Walker, *History of the Waco Baptist Association*, 380

aided in the establishment of the Trinity River Baptist Association of which his church became an ever more prominent member.

The continued growth in active members and in the surrounding community led to several major events during the 1850s, the first of which was the move into a new church building. Borrowing the Methodist church allowed them to gather, but it meant that they could not meet every week and they had to work around the Methodist congregation's schedule.²⁰ Continued growth only exacerbated these factors, until by 1854, the church moved to acquire land and build their own meeting house. The effort to move to an independent building was spearheaded by the current pastor of the church Solomon G. O'Bryan.²¹ The church had called him to the pastor after a couple years of the leadership of the founding pastor Noah T. Byars. Of course, like most issues within the Baptist Church, a committee formed to investigate the proposal and the oversee its progress. They selected a corner lot at the intersection of Fourth and Mary and began building the sanctuary.²²

Upon completion, First Baptist Church moved into its new home which allowed it to hold more regular services twice a month and then weekly.²³ Having their own building also allowed the congregation to hold "protracted meetings." In modern language, these would likely be referred to as revivals. Over the course of the eighteen fifties, a few of the weeklong meetings led to a significant number of conversions and greatly contributed to the growth of the church.²⁴

²⁰ FBC History

²¹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 31

²² Dayton Kelley, Editor. *The Handbook of Waco and McLennan County, Texas* (Waco: Texian Press, 1972).; Roger N. Conger, *A Pictorial History of Waco with a Reprint of Highlights of Waco History* (Waco: Texian Press, 1964).

²³ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 41

²⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 49-50

In addition to the benefits, owning their own building also posed challenges for the congregation. It necessitated both increased financial support and physical maintenance. To achieve this the church created the office of sexton to invest in a person the authority to provide cleaning and upkeep for the facility. Like the pastor but unlike the clerk or the deacons, the sexton received payment for his services.²⁵ The church building also created the need for other temporary committees to deal with specific aspects of the church. For example, one committee specifically addressed the seating within the church.²⁶ Despite the challenges, the benefits of owning a meeting house far outweighed any difficulties that had to be addressed. By the mid-1850s, the growth in the church was exponential and this was due at least in part to the increased visibility and ease of meeting that came with the independent edifice.

The growth and stability of First Baptist Waco made it an ideal fellowship to take a lead in regional and even state Baptist politics. Because Waco became the central hub for McClennan County, First Baptist Waco quickly became the center of Baptist life in the new jurisdiction. As all Baptist churches are independent, no official structure or authority existed. Nevertheless, the church in Waco exerted influence over its neighbors. Because the early pastors of First Baptist were some of the most respected preachers in the area, they often preached in smaller churches throughout the region. Sometimes, First Baptist took direct interest in the affairs of other churches. On one occasion, it allowed another congregation to use its facilities after they had been completed in the middle of the decade. On another occasion, the membership of First Baptist penned a letter to another local church to council it to reject a candidate for the pastorate on the grounds of unsound doctrine. From these and other instances, it is clear that the pastors

²⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 97

²⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 27

and members of First Baptist Waco possessed a prominent and influential position even shortly after the church's founding.²⁷

Beyond individual actions, the congregation also quickly became involved in the regional and state Baptist conferences. After its organization, First Baptist joined the Trinity River Baptist Association which was already well established to the south and east of McLennan County.²⁸ For the first few years, First Baptist was too small (and Waco too remote) to be a major player in this body, but the church did send delegates to the association's annual convention as well as the State Baptist Convention from an early date.²⁹ As Waco and its Baptist community grew, the church was able to play a more significant role. The establishment of a Baptist sanctuary meant that the fellowship could host regional conferences. First, they hosted a conference of the Trinity Baptist Association and then in 1859 the State Baptist Convention.³⁰ The state meeting was a massive event that drew thousands of people to Waco. First Baptist used not only its own sanctuary, but also borrowed the Methodist meeting house during the week of the event.³¹ Among those in attendance was prominent Baptist Rufus C. Burleson from Independence, Texas. As both a pastor and educator (the president of Baylor College in Independence), he held great influence among Texas Baptists and served as president of the convention.³² Although he did not know it at the time, he would go on to play an even larger role in the story of First Baptist and the City of Waco. By 1860, First Baptist Church had grown

²⁷ Examples of the church working with other churches and church associations is seen throughout the minutes, particularly in Book A.

²⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 14

²⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 33

³⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 24; First Baptist, Minute Book B, 22-23

³¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 22-23

³² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 22-23

in both size and influence to the point that it left the Trinity Baptist Association and worked with other local churches to form the Waco Baptist Association.³³ This move made sense, because Waco was far removed from the heart of the Trinity Association and McLennan County now housed many independent Baptist churches. As the heart of this new association, First Baptist Waco was poised to maintain and even expand its prominence in the years to come.

³³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 40; James L. Walker, *History of the Waco Baptist Association* (Waco: Byrne-Hill Print. House. 1897).

Chapter One

“The Lord has Greatly Blessed Us” Baptists in Waco and Beyond

When Baptists came to Waco at the beginning of the 1850s and established First Baptist Church, they did so in the context of antebellum Christian tradition and practice. The Baptists, both white and black, who formed the membership of First Baptist Church of Waco descended from a long process of religious development in North America. While this tradition may still feel familiar in some ways to modern readers, in other ways it may seem very foreign; therefore, a consideration of the constitution and other foundational documents of First Baptist Church of Waco in the context of the beliefs of the Baptists of the 1850s forms an important foundation for the rest of the study.

It is sometimes hard for modern Americans to process how important Christianity was in early America. Today, the country is generally far less religious than it was even fifty years ago.¹ Moreover, it is also very hard to understand the religious nature of people who actively supported slavery. Despite these difficulties in modern comprehension, Christianity was exceptionally important in the antebellum world, because it was rooted in the establishment of the country, and it pervaded much of society.

From the colonial era to the early national period, Christianity intertwined with the foundation of America. Historians have written many volumes on the founding of the United States, and even those who are critical of Christianity must admit that it was central to many of the colonists. Of course, Puritans established New England so that they could practice

¹ Philip S. Brenner, “Cross-National Trends in Religious Service Attendance,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 80, Issue 2, Summer 2016, 563–583.

Christianity as they deemed proper. Rhode Island broke away from Massachusetts largely for religious freedom. Maryland served as a refugee for Catholics while Pennsylvania harbored Quakers. Even colonies that were not explicitly founded for (or at least in part for) religious reasons still held religion as extremely important. Anglicans, who eventually became known as Episcopalians, dominated the religious experience of Virginia and the Carolinas.²

The amount of religious fervor in the country did ebb during the colonial era, but it was reinvigorated in the eighteenth century by the Great Awakening. This period of religious revivals swept through virtually all the colonies. The “New Lights” who supported the revival did concern some members of the religious establishment who did not support some aspects of the movement, but although the Great Awakening caused division in some denominations, it also led to the conversion of many American colonists and increased church attendance.³ Many people who had not taken organized Christianity seriously became ardent members of the church. The awakening also provided the colonies with a common event which helped to unify them in the years before the conflict with the crown and eventual revolution.

After the chaos of the American War for Independence and the founding of the United States, activity in organized Christianity once again declined across the new nation. Several of the most prominent Founding Fathers including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin held deistic views which although acknowledging God as the creator held that He no longer actively intervened in the world. Some Christians even feared that all hope was lost by the early nineteenth century. Like the First Great Awakening, the second also burst onto the scene and

² David Hackett Fisher, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 332-340.

³ Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religions Society and Politics in Colonial America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 160.

brought revival to American Christianity. However, it caused even more tumult within organized Christianity than its predecessor. The Second Great Awakening witnessed explosive growth in new “evangelical” protestant denominations. It also helped to usher in the reform movements of the mid-nineteenth century including most notably abolition. By the 1830s and 1840s, America was a thoroughly Christianized in the sense that Christianity permeated almost all of American society and even those who were not Christians were affected by the religion.

The pervasiveness of Christianity during the mid-nineteenth century can be seen most clearly in the presence of the Bible within American society. Most Americans of that era were more Biblically literate than some Christians are today. People generally knew basic Bible stories and the lessons that people could draw from them.⁴ Christianity saturated the grammar books with which children learned to read and the speeches politicians gave on the floor of the House of Representatives or Senate. Moreover, references to the Bible or other aspects of Christianity were common in literature, art, arguments, and everyday speech.⁵ Because people knew the accounts from the Bible it was easy to use them as a point of reference or a dramatic example. This is similar to the way that many modern Americans use pop culture references. Just as most Americans in the early twenty first century know that the quote: “No, I am your father” references Darth Vader from Star Wars, people of the mid-nineteenth century would similarly recognize references to Bible stories. Of course, calling on a Bible story would also allude to the lesson present (or said to be present) in that story.

⁴ Steven E. Woodworth, *While God is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. 2001), 26

⁵ Woodworth, *While God is Marching On*, 26

These lessons from the Bible greatly affected both the process of defining morality and ethics and the results of that process. Early American morality found its primary root in Christian teaching. Of course, this does not mean that everyone in America shared the same morality or ethics. The issue of slavery alone demonstrates this fact. Different conclusions do not mean though that Christianity was not present. People on both sides of an ethical dilemma went to the Bible for answers. In the case of slavery, many of the early abolitionists were committed Christians who looked to scripture to bolster their case against the institution.⁶ Proponents of slavery did not discredit the Bible, only their opponent's interpretation of it. They too searched the text of the Bible for support for their position.⁷ In this issue and many other cases, people came to different conclusions, but they looked to the Bible (their shared common reference) for support.

Christianity also permeated the realm of government and law. The Bill of Rights forbids the federal government from establishing an official religion for the United States of America. In the early days of the country, the first amendment prevented the government from supporting a single Christian denomination, but throughout the nineteenth century, Christianity reigned as the de facto religion of America. Christian prayers opened meetings of government bodies. As late as the twentieth century, Presidents called for nation-wide days of prayer and fasting (with the assumption that the prayer would be Christian prayer). Even customs such as being sworn into

⁶ Robert J. Miller, *Both Prayed to the Same God: Religion and Faith in the American Civil War* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 43-47; Woodworth, *While God is Marching On*, 12.

⁷ Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 136; Robert Elder, *The Sacred Mirror: Evangelicalism, Honor, and Identity in the Deep South, 1790-1860* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 114-140; Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Reprint, 1842), 15; Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 189.

court on a Bible point to the centrality of Christianity in early America. While many could claim to not be religious, escaping the influence of Christianity would have been a very difficult task.

What made Baptists so distinct (and in many ways controversial) were their core beliefs and values. Chief among these was believer's baptism by immersion. Contrary to most other denominations of the day, Baptists stood against the practice of baptizing infants.⁸ While some groups held this stance even in the early days of the Protestant Reformation, it was by no means the majority practice. Methodists and Presbyterians, as well as other less evangelical protestant groups held to infant baptism. Additionally, Baptists also believed that sprinkling does not satisfy the Biblical requirements for baptism. They contended that the New Testament accounts all demonstrate the practice of immersion, that is being completely submerged in water. While most other denominations practiced infant baptism and baptism by sprinkling or pouring for adult converts, the Baptists firmly rejected these practices. For this reason, Baptists required people who converted from other Christian denominations to be baptized by immersion even if they had previously been baptized in another form.⁹ The Baptists earned their denominational name from this insistence.

Although there was a divide within the Baptist community, a majority of Southern Baptists firmly adhered to the position of protestant reformer John Calvin who contended that God chose all those who would be saved, that those who he chose would be saved, and that no human could initiate salvation.¹⁰ Calvinism rests on the belief in the depravity of man and the

⁸ Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 48-49; Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (Religion in America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 7.

¹⁰ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 17.

sovereign grace of God. While this stance did not separate Baptists from some protestant denominations, it did separate them from the Methodists who were one of the most prominent alternatives to the Baptist church. Methodists held to an Arminian view of salvation which placed more emphasis on the free will of man to choose or reject God's gift of salvation.¹¹ This doctrinal debate may not seem important to those outside of the church, but to the Protestants of the nineteenth century, sound doctrine was considered essential to the unity of the church. No one could simply switch churches, because each denomination held its own accountable for both beliefs and practices.

The Baptists took the issue of accountability very seriously, perhaps more seriously than any other denomination. They desired for each church to be truly unified in Christ, which could only happen if the words and deeds of members were examined. One could not even join a Baptist church without first providing a testimony of a conversion experience and evidence of sound doctrinal understanding.¹² After acceptance into the church, every member was subject to investigation if evidence surfaced that they had acted in an unchristian manner. This could range from worldly entertainment such as dancing to grave offences like adultery. One of the most common charges was simply failing to attend services and church meetings.¹³ Although other denominations practiced church discipline, they did so with less zeal than Baptists. The desire for accountability was somewhat controversial even in the nineteenth century, but it was an essential part of the Baptist belief system and helped to shape the governance and organization of the denomination.

¹¹ Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 20-21.

¹² FBCM exemplified throughout; Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 16.

¹³ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 18.

The Baptists as a denomination were held together by ideals more than systematic structure. In general, Baptist churches guarded their independence, but this does not mean that no larger organizations existed. While there were no bishops who oversaw multiple churches, and no official governing body which could dictate changes in policy or doctrine to all Baptist congregations, local congregations often formed regional conferences for mutual support and advice.¹⁴ These bodies sometimes worked together for specific tasks, and they could expel churches from the conference, but their primary role was to serve as a place of discussion for the leaders of local congregations. Often, a church would host the conference in conjunction with its ordinary church meeting or revival.¹⁵ In spite of the importance of the conferences, they did not directly oversee the actions of individual churches or play a direct role in the selection of ministers. Conferences served as a unifying body, but they did not provide governance.

This lack of denominational oversight that was present in most other denominations was intentional. Author Rhys Isaac demonstrates that Baptists were jealously independent and democratic.¹⁶ These values directly influenced the government of Baptists churches. Each church reserved the right to call its own minister, discipline members, and manage financial affairs with the entire membership voting on almost every major decision.¹⁷ Although the church remained independent, members submitted their own independence to the body of the church. The balance of democracy and accountability meant that discipline issues were frequently addressed by the whole church. In addition to worship services, most Baptist

¹⁴ Walker, *History of the Waco Baptist Association*.

¹⁵ First Baptist Church Minutes; Walker, *History of the Waco Baptist Association*.

¹⁶ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 163-171.

¹⁷ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 6.

churches also held church meetings once a month to handle any business including discipline and voting to accept new members into the congregation. Because these meetings were central to Baptist churches, all members had to attend lest they face the charge of forsaking the gathering of believers. If too many members failed to attend, then the democratic process of the church could not function.

Like every other denomination in America, race deeply affected both belief and practice in Baptists churches. In fact, it can be argued that Baptists faced some of the most difficult dilemmas in relation to race. While other denominations attracted many African Americans, the Baptists garnered more black support than most other sects.¹⁸ This could be due in part to the missional emphasis of Baptist churches, but likely also flows from the more egalitarian nature of their doctrines and practices. By 1890, there were more than one million African American Baptists.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the very factors that made the Baptists attractive to African Americans also presented a great problem in the context of nineteenth-century American racism especially in the South.

If Baptist churches rested on the equality of all members, how could it function in the context of a strictly hierarchical social structure in which black people were argued to be inferior to whites and held in bondage without rights? This question strikes at the very heart of the dilemma of race in antebellum Baptists churches. Whites generally solved this quandary by positing that African Americans could be spiritually equal (and therefore equal in the church) while still be socially inferior and unequal.²⁰ Modern readers may find this logic preposterous,

¹⁸ Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 235.

¹⁹ Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 266.

²⁰ Jones, *The Religious Instruction*, 134-135.

but it was a tension that most white Baptists accepted. Indeed, it was the only satisfactory answer as to deny spiritual equality would strike at the heart of Baptist doctrine while allowing that spiritual equality to translate to other areas of life would threaten white southern society.

Throughout the antebellum era and within the Baptist church itself, African Americans held to their spiritual equality, but unlike whites, they could imagine that equality spreading to other aspects of life. While they did possess a more equal position to white congregants than African Americans did in most other denominations, almost equal was still clearly not equal. Recognizing this, black Baptists pushed for more autonomy and authority throughout the Antebellum Era, and many realized full autonomy after the American Civil War.²¹ Before that monumental event, however, black and white members had to wrestle with the inherent dissonance between the ideal of egalitarianism and the racial inequality of the South as they attempted to practice their faith in corporate worship.

Because Baptist churches maintained congregational autonomy, it is impossible to assert how every church dealt with the glaring racial discrepancy in the denomination. Nevertheless, as many of the churches shared views and practices, several trends can be addressed. In most Baptist churches, African American members were recognized as members.²² They were addressed as “brother” or “sister” (terminology only used to refer to members), they could receive letters of dismission if they were in good standing and had to leave the congregation, and they were subject to the discipline of the church just like all other members.²³ Despite this membership though, they were not co-equal members with white congregants. In most

²¹ Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 46.

²² Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 62.

²³ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 65.

situations, African Americans sat in pews at the back of the church or in a balcony reflecting the social inequality of the region. It also seems that many African American members may not have been allowed to exercise the right to vote on church matters (which generally required a vote of the entire membership). Gregory Wills contends that this abridgment of membership rights likely varied from congregation to congregation as he presents evidence that African American members did vote in some churches.²⁴ In other fellowships, black members may have been theoretically allowed to vote, but were unable to do so because their masters did not allow them time on Saturdays to attend the meetings.

The lack of full equality within the church caused some black Baptists to push for separate services under the umbrella of the white-dominated parent church. As demonstrated in Waco, these services were still believed to be under the authority of the original congregation and were often attended by at least a few white members of the congregation.²⁵ Sometimes black members in good standing served as exhorters, but often, a white elder preached the message in African American services. In addition to separate worship services, separate church meetings for the purpose of discipline or accepting new members were sometimes held for African American congregants. This helped to allow more activity among black members who could not attend meetings on Saturdays, but it also divided them from the white members of the congregation.

In addition to numerous Baptist churches with mixed congregations, independent black Baptists churches formed during the colonial and early national era. Although rare in rural areas, many cities contained at least one independent church which included mostly free black

²⁴ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 53.

²⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 26.

members. Unlike separate services in a white-dominated Baptist church, independent congregations were able to call African American pastors and elders. These men led the church just as white elders did in white dominated churches. Sometimes these churches joined with white congregations in denominational organizations, but they also formed their own separate conferences as well.²⁶ When engaged with white churches the treatment of their pastors and elders varied depending on region and the individual conference. Nevertheless, pastors of independent churches served as an ever-present demonstration of the capability and efficacy of black leadership.

In most issues of doctrine and practice (including discipline), black Baptists churches acted like their white counterparts, but they did express some of the variations in emphasis that were present throughout African American Christianity.²⁷ One of the largest distinctions between white--led congregations and black--led churches was the availability of resources. Because free African Americans generally owned less property and financial capital, their tithes were smaller than those of many white congregants; therefore, independent black churches often struggled financially and sometimes had difficulty securing a place of worship.²⁸ This does not mean that black congregants were not generous. Many African American Christians gave sacrificially not only to their own churches but also to missional and benevolent causes.²⁹ They also formed conference and charitable organizations to increase their effectiveness. By the

²⁶ Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 270.

²⁷ Stamp, *Peculiar Institution*, 377.

²⁸ Suzanne Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984).

²⁹ Jaqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

antebellum era, independent black churches, while relatively few had laid the foundation for massive growth after the American Civil War.

Even though many converted to the Christian faith, this does not mean that black people (whether free or enslaved) experienced Christianity in the same way that white Americans did. Most black Christians fused Christianity with older spiritual ideas and practices that can be traced back to Africa.³⁰ This blending gave rise to religions such as voodoo in the Caribbean which leaned heavily on traditional African religious practices. In America, most black Christians tended to be more orthodox in their beliefs (especially after the first several generations).³¹ Even if they accepted Christian orthodoxy and could identify with prominent American denominations, many African Americans emphasized different aspects of Christianity and experienced worship differently. They generally revered Moses and the exodus story as they could identify with the Israelites who were held in bondage in Egypt.³² When worshipping on their own, African Americans tended to be much more expressive than their white counterparts and rely less on traditional formats. Music, which was essential for most protestant groups, also differed in black Christianity. Enslaved people of color used song to give voice to their anguish and garner hope for the future.³³

Some modern Americans may question why enslaved people of color would accept the religion of their captors. Because early African Americans left little direct testimony, it is difficult to answer this question with certainty. The orthodox Christian answer is very simple:

³⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 23.

³¹ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 304.

³² Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 311.

³³ Sylvester A. Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 140.

black men and women accepted the gospel because of the power of the message itself. If the Christian faith does offer the power to save, then it is not surprising that people would accept it. It is true that in the American south, white Christians often used Christianity to try to enforce the status quo in society. Evidence suggests that while African Americans recognized this, it did not diminish the appeal of the gospel. In fact, some enslaved people of color recognized great hypocrisy in the beliefs and practices of white southern Christians.³⁴ It could be said that some (if not many) converted despite Christianity being the religion of the masters, not because of it. Of course, other reasons could also play a factor. Some black people may have converted simply to please their masters. Others might have hoped to gain from their association with Christianity generally or organized religion specifically. Whatever the cause, many black men and women converted to Christianity and joined organized religious services.

Two main options existed for black engagement with organized religion. The first of these was for African Americans to join established white dominated congregations. Within virtually all such churches, white men served as pastors and elders. Although variation existed from denomination to denomination and even from church to church within a denomination, black members were generally relegated to the back pews or a balcony.³⁵ Moreover, the pastors and elders generally refused to allow African American parishioners to assume leadership roles in the church. Particularly in the South, the church reflected the rest of society. In many congregations, this also divided white congregants based on class and station.³⁶ The powers in

³⁴ Milton C. Sernett, *African American Religious History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 106.

³⁵ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 208.

³⁶ Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 339.

society maintain the status quo throughout the South in the Antebellum Era including within the church.

If this was the case, it begs the question of why black Christians would attend such churches. Of course, the answer is not simple. For the many African Americans who never set foot in white churches, comprehending their motives seems straight forward. Either they were not Christians, or they did not want to be controlled by whites as they were in the other aspects of life. Understanding the motives for the many who did join white churches is more difficult. It is possible that many attended to appease or win favor with their masters, but this does not explain the motives of the many black Christians who actually joined white dominated congregations. Because membership entailed providing evidence of conversion in Baptist and many other Protestant churches, it would have been very difficult for anyone to gain membership without sincere belief.³⁷ Therefore, many black members were likely sincere Christians simply trying to exercise their faith. This does not mean of course that they condoned or supported the racial hierarchy in America, hence when a second option proved available, many black Christians chose to remove themselves from white congregations.

The second main option for organized worship was attendance in an African American congregation. These were more common in the North and in major cities of the South.³⁸ Some black churches formed before the American Revolution. Throughout the South, free blacks were the most likely to join independent churches. Most of these churches were like white congregations of the same denomination in practice and belief, but many struggled financially

³⁷ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 53; Examples from First Baptist Church can be found in First Baptist, Minute Book A, 7, 9.

³⁸ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 714.

compared to white congregations. Nevertheless, black churches reached out to the community around them and proved generous to those in need.³⁹ By the antebellum period, black churches of various denominations had formed their own regional organizations and established themselves as a fixture in the American religious landscape.

In most rural areas of the South, established black churches were simply not present; however, enslaved African Americans sometimes formed their own congregations with (or secretly without) the consent of the plantation's master.⁴⁰ Religious gatherings on plantations varied dramatically. Sometimes a white preacher or missionary would come to lead the service. In other cases, (especially secret meetings) people of color led their own services.⁴¹ The history of the colonial and antebellum era offers accounts of many black preachers and lay exhorters. For example, African American Andrew Bryan preach at the oldest Baptist church in Georgia as early as the 1770s.⁴² Because many white southerners feared large gatherings of African Americans, establishing official black churches throughout much of the south remained fraught with difficulty. Nevertheless, the impulse towards independence and liberty expressed itself even in remote tightly controlled regions.

White southerners held various views of African American religion, which can be grouped into two broad categories: those who wished to discourage religious development and those who favored the growth of Christianity among the African American population. Both camps worked from a paternalistic perspective which was deeply rooted in the racially defined

³⁹ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 4592.

⁴⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 212-215.

⁴¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll*, 236.

⁴² Allan Gallay. "The Origins of Slaveholders' Paternalism: George Whitefield, the Bryan Family, and the Great Awakening in the South" (*The Journal of Southern History* 53, no. 3 (1987): 369-94), 392-393.

hierarchy of the antebellum south, but they arrived at very different conclusions. Those who opposed African American Christianity often argued that religion could help enslaved blacks to organize and push for freedom. Indeed a few of the slave insurrections that did occur in early American history did involve black preachers.⁴³ Nat Turner's rebellion serves as the most famous example. Whites particularly suspected independent black services that were not monitored as potential breeding grounds for rebellion.

Despite fears of conflict, many white southern Christians adamantly supported religious development among African Americans. Obviously, some proponents of African American religion also saw benefits for the white population and the social structure of the south. When taught from a white Southern interpretation of the Bible, Christianity could be used to reinforce the status of masters and slaves and encourage enslaved workers to be more compliant.⁴⁴ Some whites argued that the Christian message would foster traits that would improve the conditions of black society making African Americans even better laborers. While it may be easy to assume that all white southerners possessed only self-promoting, cynical motives, some sincerely believed that the gospel was for all men; therefore, the souls of people of color were valuable and needed the gospel as much as white men and women. They wanted the Christian message to spread to the black population for their own good and benefit.⁴⁵

Although some men and women did argue for African American religious development, they were still steeped in paternalistic attitudes. The majority of white protestants in the antebellum south remained skeptical of black leadership and independence within Christianity.

⁴³ Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1974).

⁴⁴ Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 156-162.

⁴⁵ Jones, *The Religious Instruction*, 151-152.

Some argued that people of African descent were intrinsically inferior and therefore incapable of independence. Others contended that while not inherently inferior, the condition of African Americans inhibited their leadership in the Church. Whatever the justification, virtually all southern whites preferred mixed congregations with white leadership. Even in the plantation setting, whites wanted plantation owners and carefully chosen white missionaries to lead religious services. They argued that white pastors possessed the training and intellect to properly teach the word of God.⁴⁶

The original members of First Baptist Church of Waco drafted governing documents including a statement of faith, a constitution, and rules of decorum for their new community in this complicated web of religious and racial beliefs and practices. In the case of Baptists, in general, and First Baptist particular, these foundational documents were extremely important because of the emphasis on accountability. All members had the standard by which they were going to be examined. Thankfully for posterity, the original clerk of First Baptist Church recorded these foundational documents at the beginning of the church's first minute book.⁴⁷ The first major document is the statement of faith. Generally, this outlines a very standard Calvinist doctrine held by many southern Baptists, but it did differ in one major point. Strict Calvinists believe that election of the saints is an act of God's sovereign choice. Although First Baptist's statement of faith does affirm election, it stresses God's foreknowledge more than his willful choice.⁴⁸ The shift in emphasis does not move First Baptist into the Arminian camp, but it does

⁴⁶ This is the central focus of Jones' work in *The Religious Instruction of the Negro.*; James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 107.

⁴⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 4-13.

⁴⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 6.

move the doctrine away from strict Calvinism. Although it is unclear from the extant documents, it is likely that other Baptist churches in the region had also softened on this doctrine, because First Baptist enjoyed full fellowship with the regional Baptist Association.⁴⁹ Interestingly, the shift away from hardline Calvinism is still accepted by many modern Baptists who hold to only some tenants of Calvinism without rejecting it altogether.

Another key document included with the minute book is the church constitution which discusses the organizational structure of the church. Like most Baptist churches, First Baptist is clearly defined as an independent congregation which has the authority to call its own pastor, maintain financial independence, and execute church discipline.⁵⁰ It also lays out the process of membership and states that all decisions are to be made by the majority and that no member should, “absent himself from conference, unless necessity requires him to do so.”⁵¹ While this does use gendered language, the church constitution never explicitly differentiates between men and women, nor does it make any statement regarding race.⁵² Therefore, by a strict reading of the church constitution, it does appear that both women and African American members would be included in voting on church issues. Of course, the letter of the law and actual practice are not always the same thing. As the rules of decorum (the last foundational document) indicates.

While women and African Americans may have maintained the right to vote, white males were the clear leaders of the church community. The rules of decorum which follow the church constitution specify that free male members had to attend church conferences.⁵³ It does

⁴⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 21.

⁵⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 9.

⁵¹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 9.

⁵² First Baptist, Minute Book A, 9.

⁵³ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 10.

not bar women or enslaved black men from attending, but it does not require them to do so which creates clear variations in standards. During the meetings it also directly provides instruction for how “brothers” (male members of the church) are to speak and raise motions.⁵⁴ Clearly this excludes “sisters” (female members) from speaking during the conference. An exception to this rule would be for a woman to provide testimony or answer disciplinary charges. Interestingly, the rules do not specify that only free male members could speak or raise issues in the conference. While it may or may not have been regularly exercised, this does leave open the possibility for African American males to raise motions and address the assembly.

Mid-way through the 1850s, First Baptist Church heavily revised its Constitution and Rules of Decorum. While it is unclear exactly what prompted the sweeping changes, the movement appears to have grown out of a motion to amend one specific article of the constitution which related to the number of delegates to be sent to regional and state conferences.⁵⁵ It is also notable that the initial motion came on the heels of one of the church’s protracted meetings.⁵⁶ Possibly, new members influenced the move. However it started, the minutes do make it obvious that great care was taken to rewrite these foundational documents. The conference of members appointed a committee to investigate revisions in the late summer of 1856. This body included some of the most respected members of the congregation. Most notably, the group included the faithful original clerk Noah Woods, the pastor at that time Solomon G. O’Bryan, and Newell W. Crain one of the most prominent lay members of the church who eventually became an elder in the church.⁵⁷ The members ultimately voted to

⁵⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 10.

⁵⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 38.

⁵⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 38.

⁵⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 38.

significantly amend the constitution and rules of decorum in 1857, and several substantial changes had major implications for the members of the church.⁵⁸

One of the most significant changes in the new constitution related to the membership and voting on church issues. If the original constitution was a bit vague about exactly who was to vote, the new constitution offered clarity. In the very first section of the document it states that the membership of the church is composed of all “believing men, and women, regularly baptized in water on a profession of their faith.”⁵⁹ The addition of the word “women” in the article clarifies the fact that as members, women would vote on all matters of the church, because voting was one of the hallmark privileges and duties of membership. If there remained any doubt, it was dispelled by the revised rules of decorum which state, “It shall be the duty of all members present, both male, and female, to vote on all questions put to the church.”⁶⁰ While some of the gendered language in the rules of decorum still leaves some doubt as to whether a woman could speak to an issue or raise a motion, phrases like “Every motion entertained by the church, shall be made by one member, and seconded by another” suggest that these powers were also within women’s purview.⁶¹

The new constitution and rules of decorum make no direct or indirect reference to race.⁶² This is significant, because the previous rules had stipulated “free male members” in at least one article.⁶³ Under those old rules most African Americans (possibly all African Americans) were not allowed to contribute to church meetings (other than maybe by voting). Dropping explicit

⁵⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 53-59.

⁵⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 53-59.

⁶⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 53-59.

⁶¹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 53-59.

⁶² First Baptist, Minute Book A, 53-59.

⁶³ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 1-7.

reference to free male members means that as per the rules of decorum, all members regardless of race could raise issues before the church and vote on each question. Of course, the letter of the law and actual practice do not always go hand in hand. It is important to note that by 1857, the black members of the church were already holding their own worship service with a church conference immediately following the meeting. The new rules would apply for them in that context, but there is little evidence that black members attended the Saturday church conference with the white portion of the congregation. If they did, they would have been allowed to participate by a strict reading of the rules of decorum, but it is quite conceivable that social pressure continued to prevent them from exercising their theoretical rights. Conversely, because rules do not disqualify any member based on race, it is possible that some African American members did attend the full church conference and contributed through their voice and vote.

It has been said that the heart of Baptist churches were the church conferences; this was definitely true of First Baptist Church of Waco.⁶⁴ Initially, the church met once a month in conference on the Saturday before the second Sunday and the church clerk (originally a man named Noah Woods) recorded the events of each session.⁶⁵ The moderator followed a standard format for these gatherings. Usually, he presented a short message, led a song, and then initiated the meeting. During the business portion of the meeting, the clerk read the minutes from the previous meeting for the church's approval and "the doors were open for the reception of members."⁶⁶ If any new members presented themselves, they either needed to provide a letter of dismissal from another Baptist church or they had to offer their "experience of grace"

⁶⁴ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 37.

⁶⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 3.

⁶⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 79.

(testimony) and be baptized. If a baptism was required, the church would reconvene after the conference or the subsequent meeting at the river for the ordinance of baptism.⁶⁷ After calling for new members, the church dealt with any financial matters or election of church offices if needed. In the case of the pastor, the members generally voted each November or December to call a man for the coming year.⁶⁸

Arguably the most important part of the conference came only after the regular business had been addressed. At that point, the moderator called for new business. Although this could include many different issues, the most common topic of discussion was cases of church discipline. Sometimes a member preemptively confessed to a sin in order to seek forgiveness from the congregation, but more often, a case arose from a complainant or a witness.⁶⁹ Mutual disputes between two members which could not be resolved in private were also treated as cases of discipline. Based on the minutes, it appears that the members of the church often knew about disciplinary issues before they came before the congregation.⁷⁰ In most cases, the members would elect a committee to investigate the charges and report back to the church during the following meeting. Because the church only met once a month, cases could drag out before the church finally voted on a verdict. If the offender was guilty and unrepentant of a recurring minor offense like dancing or gambling or guilty of any major offense such as adultery, they were subject to exclusion from the fellowship.⁷¹ Exclusion may sound harsh to many modern

⁶⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book A, evidenced throughout.

⁶⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 16 (first example).

⁶⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, seen thought in the context of First Baptist Waco; Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 37.

⁷⁰ This is because the minutes often simply say in the case of instead of actually recording the charge.

⁷¹ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 41.

Americans, but to members of nineteenth-century Baptist churches, it served a two-fold purpose. First, it ensured the spiritual health of the church body and prevented bad influences from tempting other members of the congregation. Second, the church hoped that exclusion would lead to ultimate reconciliation. The point was not to kick someone out with no hope of redemption but to impress upon unrepentant people the gravity of their actions so that they would eventually seek repentance and renewed fellowship.⁷²

Outside of the centrally important church conference meetings, the other main gathering of the church was Sunday worship services. When the original members created First Baptist, they initially did not hold services every Sunday, in part because they did not have their own place of worship. The first services were actually held in the Methodist Church which had formed before First Baptist.⁷³ Baptist services were generally less formal than other contemporary denominations such as the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians. Nevertheless, they did follow a standard structure which included singing and preaching as well as corporate prayer. In addition to set meetings, First Baptist sometimes gathered for special events. Usually, the church sent members to represent it at meetings of the regional association, but on several occasions, First Baptist hosted the regional conference. Revivals also brought the church together for extended periods of time.

Much like their Baptist forebears, the members of First Baptist Church were a disparate group drawn together by their specific doctrinal beliefs. Like other Baptists across the South, they worked to form a unified body of believers who properly practiced the faith. The first decade of the community's existence would see this unity challenged as much growth and

⁷² Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 45-46.

⁷³ Kelley, *Handbook of Waco*, 17.

change occurred within the new church. Most notably, the original white members were quickly joined by African Americans whose very presence raised questions about what the church should look like in an era of severe racial divisions.

Chapter Two

“The Right Hand of Fellowship” Membership and Discipline in First Baptist.

The first decade of First Baptist Church from 1851-1861 witnessed significant growth in both the church and the surrounding community. As in most periods of expansion especially those following the creation of a new entity, First Baptist faced many struggles and dilemmas in its early days. Although the founders had taken great care as they established the church with a clearly delineated statement of faith, church constitution, rules of decorum, and church covenant, putting those ideals into practice is never as clean as placing them on paper. Like most Baptist churches of the era, first Baptist Waco had to address the issues of membership, church discipline, and ultimately a divided congregation in the context of the racialized social system of the antebellum American South.

Every organization needs people, and churches are no different. It is the people that ultimately make any association worth creating, because they impart the character and form the living body out of what is otherwise just writing on paper or an empty building. Therefore, from businesses to governments, many organizations create strict membership processes. In the case of evangelical churches, membership is of paramount importance, because their overarching goal is to glorify God through pure fellowship and worship and to spread the good news to those around them. Of all Christian sects, the Baptists of the nineteenth century were one of the most

strictly observant of careful membership practices.¹ First Baptist Church of Waco generally followed the standard procedures of its denomination.

In order to join First Baptist (and most Baptist churches of the era), an applicant had to pursue one of two possible options depending on whether they were previously members of another Baptist Church. If the prospects were coming from another Baptist church, then First Baptist expected them to have “letters of dismissal” from their previous congregation.² These letters signified that a person had left the former church in good standing. Throughout the Baptists of the South, it was the responsibility of a member to petition his or her church for a letter before they left the community.³ In fact, leaving without a letter could raise the specter of church disciplinary proceedings. If some sought to join First Baptist on the grounds that they came from another Baptist church, but they did not have a letter, then the church conference usually charged the clerk to write to the applicant’s former church for a letter, or it appointed a committee (usually composed of three or four respected members of the congregation) to investigate the matter. Only after the investigation concluded that the applicant was a Baptist in good standing would the church accept the person into the fellowship.

Often, men and women came forward to join First Baptist who had never been part of a Baptist (or possibly any) church before. In the case of these new converts, First Baptist followed a different process than it did for transferring members. New believers had to stand before the church conference and relate their “Christian experience.”⁴ Basically, this was an oral testimony of the applicant’s conversion experience (the moment that the person was “born again” by

¹ Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

² Wills, *Democratic Religion*; First Baptist, Minute Book A and B, reference throughout.

³ Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 15.

accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior). Beyond the testimony, the church examined (questioned) the person to ensure that he or she did not hold grievous doctrinal errors and that (as far as humans can tell of other people) the convert was sincere. In some denominations, this would be the end of the process, but for the Baptists, one more step was required for full membership: believer's baptism by immersion. This ordinance took place immediately following the conference or was scheduled for a later date (usually after the next scheduled conference).⁵ After all of these steps, the church would vote to "extend the right hand of fellowship" to the new member.⁶

As with other Baptist churches (and indeed most every organization), joining First Baptist Church imparted both responsibilities and privileges. Because Baptist churches functioned as independent democracies, they generally required a great deal from their membership. One of the most basic stipulations of members was that they attend services and church conferences. While this did vary somewhat based on gender and race, the overarching ideal was that all members would attend every scheduled meeting. While this may sound strict, the whole body needed to be present for important votes.⁷ Members were also expected to maintain purity by living according to the guidelines of the Bible (as interpreted by the Baptists) and espousing correct doctrine. These responsibilities were particularly important, because Baptists viewed their fellowships as pure models of proper Christianity. If some members deviated from the standards, it meant that the whole body was not pure. Furthermore, it endangered the purity of other members of the body.⁸ Members were also expected to vote on

⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 15.

⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 14.

⁷ Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

⁸ Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

issues ranging from fellowship to discipline and elect officers.⁹ Particularly in the case of white male members, serving on committees was also common. Because many issues required evidence, many committees were needed to perform the investigation and report back to the whole congregation. In most cases, committees did not make decisions on their own, but it does appear that their recommendations were usually followed. This means that respected white males who served on committees exercised great influence over the direction of the church by swaying the decisions of the membership. Ultimately, joining a Baptist church was not a decision that one could take lightly nor could someone expected to join without agreeing to various responsibilities.

To some degree, the weight of responsibility in Baptist churches was offset by the privileges that membership entailed. Chief among these was a level of equality (at least in theory) that was not present anywhere else in society even in many other denominations.¹⁰ All members were viewed as spiritual equals and referred to as “brother” or “sister.” This level of equality meant that even poor members could exercise authority in the church that they could not in the rest of society. The theoretical equality of the Baptist doctrine made the denomination (and indeed First Baptist Church) particularly attractive to both poor whites and African Americans.¹¹ Being a member granted someone tangible benefits. For example, in the case of disputes with other members, both parties were to settle the matter without resorting to the legal system. In particularly difficult cases, the church itself could serve as a mediator.¹² Membership

⁹ Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

¹⁰ Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

¹¹ Leonard, *Baptist Ways*; Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹² First Baptist, Minute Book B, several cases appear in the minutes.

also provided an expectation of support in the case of illness or financial difficulty. Baptists who fell on hard times could look to other Baptists for help. Of course, the most basic benefit of joining the church was the sense of belonging and purpose which fellowship provide. Virtually all attractive organizations offer some level of identity, but churches address the deeply personal aspect of spiritual belief. Connection to a church offers members a very real sense of being part of something bigger (and in some sense more important) than themselves. Despite their disparate backgrounds, Baptists could base their fellowship with one another on a shared doctrine and spiritual belief.

Over the course of the 1850s, First Baptist church extended this its fellowship to numerous new members. While this is not necessarily surprising given the growth in the general population, the increase in the church is still impressive. At its founding, First Baptist included four original members plus the missionary who served as the first pastor. By September 1859, the church reported to the regional association that it had a total of 144 members, and it was still growing. In the immediately preceding year, forty-three new members had joined the church. Although twenty-seven members had left the church during the same time period, this is still a net increase.¹³ The copy of the letter also indicates that about half of the new members had been received by letter while the other half were received by “experience and baptism.”¹⁴ This means that the growth in the church was not only driven by Baptists who were moving to the area but also by new converts to Christianity (or at least to the denomination). In addition to the members, most churches of the era also served as the home of many congregants who did not

¹³ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 126.

¹⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 126.

choose to join the church.¹⁵ With this in mind, it is reasonable to assume that a church service may have significantly more people in attendance than the actual number of members.

As might be expected, by 1860, the membership of First Baptist church reflected the growth that had occurred in the population of Waco. While some members came and left before 1860, most of the members who joined the church were still active as of that year. This means that the Federal Census of 1860 when used in conjunction with the church roster book can provide a very good picture of what the congregation looked like by the end of the first decade. The white membership of first Baptist church tended to include mostly married men and women.¹⁶ Presumably, their children also attended services with them, but because Baptists did not include anyone in the membership until they had made their own profession of faith, young people did not instantly join the church when they were born or when their parents transferred membership to the church (unless they had already made a profession of faith and had their own letter of dismissal).¹⁷ Over the course of the 1850s, the minutes note most new members as husbands and wives along with possibly their older children. On rare occasions, white women joined without an associated male. This could mean that they were single, but it is also possible that their husband attended but did not join or that the husband did not attend at all. In at least one case, a woman's husband joined the church some months after his wife.¹⁸ It was common

¹⁵ Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

¹⁶ First Baptist Church Waco. *Roster Book*. Collection of Church Records, First Baptist Church Archive, Waco, TX.

¹⁷ Leonard, *Baptist Ways*; Wills, *Democratic Religion*; First Baptist, Minute Book A, seen throughout the records.

¹⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 14, 17.

for children to join the church months or years after their parents once they were old enough to relate their own “Christian experience” to the church.¹⁹

Socioeconomically, First Baptist attracted white members mainly from the middle and upper classes of Waco society. Most of the white members of First Baptist were part of households that ranged from comfortable to wealthy (in some cases very wealthy).²⁰ This does not mean that all the men in the church drew their wealth from the same vocations. As with the surrounding community, many were involved in agriculture or animal husbandry, but others were professionals who had moved to the city to support its growing population. Surprisingly absent from the rolls of First Baptist church were many poorer white members. This is interesting, because throughout the early nineteenth century, Baptists generally attracted the most adherents from the lower classes of society.²¹ In fact, members of the upper class generally looked down on the egalitarian nature of the Baptists.²² This had clearly changed by the 1850s (at least on the frontier of Texas) as First Baptist served as the home not only to more wealthy members than poor members, but also men who were extremely prominent in the civic and economic activity for the region.

One of the most dominant groups in both First Baptist and the community at large were the planters of the area. Although they did not form the majority of the community, their wealth and land holdings provided them with a significant powerbase. By 1860, the church was home to several of these people and their families. The members with the largest plantation (in terms of

¹⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 22.

²⁰ First Baptist, Roster Book; “US Federal Census” (McLennan County: United States Federal Government, 1860).

²¹ Kidd and Hankins, *Baptists in America*; Sweeney, *Evangelical Story*; Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

²² Leonard, *Baptist Ways*.

number of enslaved workers) were Thomas B. Clements and William A Dunklin with 49 and 46 enslaved persons respectively.²³ Following behind these two in terms of numbers (but eclipsing them in prominence) was Joseph Warren Speight. He owned a sizable tract of land to the south of town and held 32 enslaved laborers. From his admission to the church in the mid-1850s, he was one of the most influential members of the congregation and certainly the most influential planter. Over the course of his membership, he served as the church clerk, a deacon, and helmed numerous committees.²⁴ In addition to these men, five other members of the church owned ten or more slaves as of the 1860 census. Including William Kellum who was both a farmer and merchant and R. B. Wilson who like Speight was heavily involved in the affairs of the church.²⁵

In addition to the wealthy landowners, First Baptist Church (and the community at large) was also home to many people involved in agriculture who owned few, if any, slaves. Within the church, about 17 male heads of house were farmers who owned fewer than ten enslaved workers.²⁶ Most of these men had large families who presumably worked the land alongside them. A couple of these were not listed as farmers but as stock raisers (ranchers).²⁷ This fact fits with the environment of the region to the west of Waco. While the number of independent small famers was double that of the wealthy land holders, their influence on the church appears to have been disproportionately low. Members who fit the category of small farmers are not mentioned in the minutes as often as the wealthy planters.²⁸ One key difference was that they served on

²³ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

²⁴ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census; Map of Waco.

²⁵ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

²⁶ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

²⁷ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

²⁸ First Baptist, Minute Books. Members who were not elders in the church are generally only referenced when they join the church or if there is a matter of discipline related to them.

committees less frequently than their wealthy counterparts. This could be a function of wealth and power being brought to bear within the context of church politics, but it is also likely that the wealthy farmers simply had more time to invest in the church as well as civic organizations and duties. Of course, this reality is also a reflection of the disproportionate power that usually comes with wealth. Despite this imbalance, small farmers and their families nevertheless made up a significant portion of the church membership and while they may not have taken leadership positions as often, the democratic nature of Baptist churches meant that their collective votes would still have made an impact on church decisions.

Together, the planters and small farmers accounted for about twenty-five of the adult white male members of the church, but this was slightly less than half of the total white male membership of the congregation as of 1860.²⁹ Of the other half, about twenty held non-agricultural professional jobs. The nature of these positions varied widely. Included among the professionals were three physicians, five lawyers, three ministers, a teacher, a hotel keeper, a grocer, a clerk, and several merchants. A few of these men such as lawyer J. W. Nowlin owned slaves according to the 1860 census, but most of the professional members do not appear to have been slave owners. Most had migrated from other parts of the South, but one came from as far away as New York.³⁰ Likely because of their education as well as their proximity to the church, these men exhibited great influence on the congregation. The ministers obviously held great sway, but it was the work of committees that made most of the major decisions for the congregations. Some of these professionals show up repeatedly on committees alongside the

²⁹ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

³⁰ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

very active planters who were previously mentioned.³¹ Of special note in this group is Richard Byrd. Burleson. After arriving in Waco to teach at Waco College, he became a leading member of the church (alongside his brother) and served on numerous committees. It is important to note that both the number and influence of these professional members increased throughout the 1850s.³²

The remainder of the white adult males worked as either craftsmen or laborers. These men are recorded in the church roster book but are infrequently mentioned in the minutes.³³ In general, they were poorer than either the professionals or the independent farmers and planters. Nevertheless, much variance existed within this category of members. On one end, there was a silver smith named James Harris along with a saddle maker and a few carpenters.³⁴ They likely lived comfortably in town. The laborers including a well digger and a field hand were some of the poorest white members of the church. In the middle were Elisha Lankford and William Umberson who both worked as overseers.³⁵ Lankford was wealthy enough to hold one enslaved person himself (likely as a personal servant).³⁶ While neither of these men appear to have been particularly active in church affairs, it is likely that they had the most daily interaction with some of the African American members of the church.

During the 1850s, only enslaved people of color joined First Baptist Church. Because enslaved African Americans were not listed in the 1860 census other than by age on the slave schedules and the church only listed black members by first name in the church roster book,

³¹ First Baptist, Minute Books.

³² First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

³³ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census; First Baptist, Minute Books.

³⁴ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

³⁵ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

³⁶ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

information about specific black members of the church is much more difficult to glean than knowledge of white members.³⁷ This does not however mean that nothing can be deduced about the African Americans in First Baptist Church. One very beneficial fact is that the church minutes always listed the master of an enslaved laborer when that person joined the church.³⁸ This, combined with information from the census about those men and women, can help provide a picture of the African American membership of First Baptist Church.

One of the most basic distinctions with the enslaved community of rural antebellum America was whether a person worked in the fields or as a house servant. While it is by no means guaranteed, comparing the listed slave owners of members of First Baptist provides a reasonable expectation of what kind of work enslaved members did. This examination suggests that two-thirds of the black members of the church likely worked as field laborers with the other third serving as household or personal servants.³⁹ It is also possible that a few of the black members were trained as craftsmen, but there is not data to directly support this speculation. A few of the members who labored as personal servants to the town's doctors or lawyers (or wealthy planters who had a house in town) likely lived in town themselves, but this was probably only a small number of the black members of the church. Most of the African Americans who called First Baptist home probably lived on farms or plantations in the surrounding area. Given the general patterns of antebellum slavery, it is likely that these members only had leave to come to town for church on Sunday; therefore, whether or not they had a theoretical right to vote during the main church meeting on Saturday, few of them were likely there to do so. However,

³⁷ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census Slave Schedules.

³⁸ First Baptist, Minute Books.

³⁹ First Baptist, Roster Book; First Baptist, Minute Books; 1860 US Federal Census.

as will soon be seen, African Americans within the church found ways to make their voices heard even if they were not generally at the Saturday meetings.

The other major piece of information that can be gleaned from extant records is the number of African American members whose master was also a member of the church. Many modern readers may assume that this was a very high percentage, but the data suggests that this was not the case. Only about 34% of the black members of the churches labored under masters who also attended the church.⁴⁰ The two most prominent names in this regard were Joseph Warren Speight with ten members listed as his “servants,” N. W. Battle with five, and R. B. Wilson also with five.⁴¹ Several other white members held one or two African Americans who were also members. As with so many other aspects of the story of First Baptist, Speight is particularly interesting, because as of 1860, he held 32 enslaved people of color.⁴² This means that a full third of the African Americans who labored on his land were members of the church. Moreover, ten were under the age of thirteen and as children would not have been members of the church.⁴³ Therefore, about half of the African Americans who were of age to seek membership were members in First Baptist. The black members from Speight’s plantation were more the exception than the rule. Most black members worshiped with only one or two other members who served under the same master. In some cases, this may have been a spouse or parent and child, but except in one case where it is explicitly listed, such relationships are open to speculation.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

⁴¹ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

⁴² First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

⁴³ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

⁴⁴ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

As only a third of the black members' masters were members of first Baptist, the overwhelming majority served people who were not part of the church.⁴⁵ This indicates that it was common (at least in Waco, Texas in the 1850s) for African Americans to possess enough liberty to join churches of their choosing. While it is unclear if some members sought membership because their masters were in the church, most of the black members of First Baptist did not do so because of their masters. On Sundays, black members came to church from numerous farms and plantations that rested on the outskirts of Waco. This was an opportunity not only to worship, but also to see other Christians who they likely did not see throughout the week. Taken together with the demographic data, the African American community within first Baptist was a fairly homogenous group in terms of lifestyle and labor, but it was diverse in the sense that it drew people together from across the area.

Over time, the growth in the church necessitated changes. Originally, the church only met in conference once per month. This limited fellowship gave way to meeting twice per month and eventually services every Sunday. This increase in meeting corresponded with the acquisition of new facilities. In 1851, First Baptist borrowed space from the Methodists, but growth and a desire to meet more frequently prompted the church members to erect their own church building. This effort began with an investigatory committee in 1855 and resulted in the construction of a church building conveniently located near the Brazos River. The edifice was large enough to accommodate continued growth and allow First Baptist to serve as the host for regional conferences and even the 1859 state conference.⁴⁶ First Baptist was poised to become a leading congregation among Texas Baptists.

⁴⁵ First Baptist, Roster Book; 1860 US Federal Census.

⁴⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 22.

Given the difficulty of joining and maintaining membership in Baptist churches, people must have had very strong reasons for seeking acceptance into First Baptist church. Many of these potential benefits can be summed up as social benefits. Joining any organization comes with inherent social consequences. For example, in the modern day joining a high school football team in the South or a civic organization like the Lions Club confers some degree of instant status on the applicant. Of course, joining churches both today and in the past can have similar effects. One of the most obvious benefits is making connections with other people who share similar beliefs and values. For both white members and African American parishioners, First Baptist Church offered an avenue to join in community with other people. This was likely particularly attractive in a place like Waco that was constantly growing during its first decade of existence. When a new family came to town, one of the first places to look to meet people was the church. Certainly, this was not the only avenue, but in the overtly religious world of the nineteenth century, it was an obvious one. For African Americans who had less freedom of mobility than their white counterparts, church provided an opportunity to meet people they would not get to see throughout the week.

Another key social reason to join a church was the opportunity to gain power and prestige both inside and outside of the organization. For early Baptists, joining the denomination would not have conferred much (if any social benefit), because more traditional denomination held much of the nation's wealthy Christians and looked down on the radical Baptists.⁴⁷ By 1850 in Texas, this was not the case anymore. The Baptist denomination was one of the two largest Christian groups in the region alongside the Methodists. Many state leaders (especially in the

⁴⁷ Leonard, *Baptist Ways*; Kidd and Hankins, *Baptist in America*.

realm of education) claimed Baptist membership.⁴⁸ With a local church, officer positions required responsibility, but they also conferred prestige and prominence. For example, as the church clerk, Noah Woods directly engaged with all the business of the church.⁴⁹ Even for African American members, there was some hope of gaining authority. In the case of many Baptist churches, black members could vote during church conferences (a privilege they did not hold in any other part of southern society) and sometimes serve as deacons. At First Baptist Waco, African Americans at least voted on extending fellowship to black applicants and possibly other issues as well.⁵⁰ Additionally, several black men served as deacons within the church.⁵¹

Pleasing others could be a third social benefit of joining a church. Husbands sometimes go to church to appease their wives. Children often go simply because their parents tell them that they should or require that they attend. In these cases, the very act of going to worship has a positive social benefit within a family unit. This motivation for church membership or at least attendance exists to the present day, but there is no reason to believe that it would not have been a factor in the past. For enslaved African Americans, it is conceivable that they would please their masters by joining the church if the masters themselves were pious. Some African Americans may have found motivation to join the church in the prospect of finding favor with their masters. Because very few left testimonies of their reasoning for joining the church, this remains hard to confirm.

While all the social benefits of joining First Baptist Church were real and could have played a role in an individual's decision to seek membership in church, alone they would not

⁴⁸ Burleson, *Life and Writings*; Kelley, *Handbook of Waco*.

⁴⁹ FBC Minute, Book A.

⁵⁰ FBC Minute Book A, 26.

⁵¹ FBC Minute Book A, 70 & 77.

have been enough to motivate or secure entry into the community. The Baptists of the nineteenth century created a much higher bar to entry than most modern churches hold. For this reason, most applicants who sought membership whether white or black were sincere. The social benefits alone were not enough to drive someone to seek membership if there was not a sincere underlying religious faith. Baptists were not secret about their selection process and very few people would subject themselves to the public examination required for membership. Simply put, gaining social benefit did not outweigh the cost of going through (indeed faking one's way through) the membership process. Moreover, at least some of the social benefits could be gained simply by regularly attending worship without ever going through the process of membership. Although someone who only attended services could not vote or hold office, they could still make connections with other congregants. Moreover, they were also not subject to the discipline of the church.⁵² If enslaved African Americans used church to please their masters, it is much more likely that they did so by attending services than by seeking membership.

Further evidence of sincerity for those transferring from other Baptist churches are the letters of dismissal. First Baptist did not save all the letters that they received, but the fact that the documents convinced the membership of the church to accept new petitioners speaks volumes. The fact that Baptists carried letters with them across the country also demonstrates their sincere faith and the importance that they placed on their Baptist membership. In the case of white Baptists, who possibly had a great deal of luggage, including a small piece of paper was not difficult, but it still demonstrates that they took the initiative to request the letter from their previous church. For African Americans who probably traveled with far fewer possessions, the fact that they intentionally carried the letter of dismissal says even more about their sincerity.

⁵² Leonard, *Baptist Ways*; Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

For both white and black Baptists, letters of dismissal indicated that they wanted to be prepared to join a new church as easily and quickly as possible.

Ultimately, the greatest indicator of sincere faith for each member of First Baptist Church was that they were accepted as members by the church conference. Even if someone who was not a sincere Baptist had decided to apply for membership, it is very unlikely that they would have been accepted into the fellowship. A new convert who was insincere (joining only for social reasons instead of spiritual ones) would have had great difficulty convincing the church conference to accept them. In addition to providing an oral testimony, they also would have had to stand up to questioning by members of the church.⁵³ Theoretically, if someone wanted to join the church without actually being a Baptist, the best method would be to claim membership in a Baptist church but have “failed” to request a letter from the “previous” church. Even if this was the best method, it still would not have worked as the church clerk would write a letter or a committee would be appointed to investigate the matter.⁵⁴ Taken together, the evidence of the members and the sheer difficulty of joining under false pretenses means that First Baptist Church was a body of sincere Baptist believers, and that members of all races joined primarily because of their sincere Christian faith and demonstration of adherence to Baptist doctrines.

Although the original membership of First Baptist included only white men and women, African Americans quickly began petitioning to join the church, and in May 1852, the first black man was accepted into the fellowship barely a year after the founding of the church.⁵⁵ This original member was an enslaved man named Cato whose master Bentley D. Arnold had joined

⁵³ Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

⁵⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A.

⁵⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 20.

the church three months before and was ordained as the second deacon of the church the following June.⁵⁶ Although enslaved, he joined by presentation of a letter of dismissal (as did many other African Americans who joined after him). While he was the first member, it is likely that he and other black worshippers had been attending the services in the months prior to his admission into the fellowship. Over the next year, several more African Americans joined the church with likely even more in attendance on any given Sunday.

Like all other Baptists in Texas and across the South, First Baptist church had to wrestle with the issue of race. The racial hierarchy of the antebellum world posed a particularly significant problem for Baptists because of their emphasis on spiritual equality and democracy. Southern Baptists had to find some way to justify the world in which they lived while still upholding their doctrinal stances. Obviously, this was not necessarily an easy feat. As is seen in the case of First Baptist, an examination of membership patterns offers an avenue to analyze the contradictions in the Baptist system. In order to understand the dilemma, it is first necessary to consider the racialized social system of the south in which First Baptist Church existed and then examine the membership of First Baptist with this context in mind.

A strict hierarchy based on race formed the foundation of almost every aspect of society in the Antebellum South.⁵⁷ This structure had developed over the course of generations and become deeply rooted by the 1850s. At the heart of the system was the enslavement of millions of Africans and their descendants simply because of the color of their skin. The rights that the Founding Fathers had enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights were

⁵⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 20.

⁵⁷ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll*; James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998); Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

not extended to the enslaved population of the South. The black population formed the very bottom rung of a strict social ladder. The system looked back to the feudal structure where lords oversaw their peasant workers who in turn were completely subject to the lord's discretion.⁵⁸ Even free African Americans were held to be inferior to the white population of the South. Over time, white leaders developed numerous arguments to justify this social system. Some argued that science demonstrated that people of color were inherently inferior to white people. Others used the Bible to defend slavery by connecting Africans to the curse on Noah's son Ham.⁵⁹ Whatever argument they used, it was clear that most whites (even poor whites) held firmly to the belief that they were superior.

In practice, the racial structure of southern society meant that African Americans were not equal in virtually any respect and could not hope to ever rise above their situation. They were not allowed to vote or have any direct influence to provoke social change.⁶⁰ Most of the black population remained enslaved throughout the era. They were subject to the direction of their masters and could be sold, punished, or otherwise mistreated with virtually no recourse.⁶¹ Even free African Americans primarily worked as servants and laborers. Resistance to the structure of southern society was met with direct force and the few attempts by slaves to rise in armed rebellion were put down without mercy.⁶² This does not mean that African Americans had no will or agency to affect their lives or society around them. No matter what arguments

⁵⁸ Oakes, *The Ruling Race*.

⁵⁹ David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁶⁰ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll*; Oakes, *The Ruling Race*; *Black Majority*; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975).

⁶¹ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 20-21.

⁶² Wood, *Black Majority*, 308-326; Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 132-134.

white defenders of slavery made, African Americans were people just like them who had hopes and dreams and looked for ways to express and manifest them.⁶³ While very few avenues were open for the African American people, religion (both organized and individual) was one place they could place some hope.

By 1859, race became a significant factor in the membership of First Baptist Church of Waco. From the original four white members, the church had grown to a sizeable 144. Of those, 94 were white while the remaining 50 were black. It is necessary to examine both groups in order to understand the interaction of race and religion within the church. As Waco grew, it attracted many white settlers to build farmsteads. Although some were small, independent farmers, several wealthy planters also moved into the region. Traditionally, Baptists attracted the lower class more than the upper echelons of society. While this may have been true, the records of First Baptists indicate that a number of the white members owned sizable plantations and held large numbers of slaves. Chief among these planter members was a man named Joseph Warren Speight.⁶⁴ He and his wife joined the church during a revival that occurred in 1857. Speight went on to serve in the church for many years both as a deacon and as the church clerk. The presence of Speight and a few other wealthy residents of McLennan County within the church indicates that by the 1850s the Baptists had gained some level of “respectability” among the upper classes.

The records demonstrate that many of the white congregants who joined First Baptist did so with letters of dismissal from other Baptist churches. Some of the letters came from places outside of Texas with the states of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana all

⁶³ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll*, 88-89; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 23.

⁶⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 51; 1860 Federal Census.

represented.⁶⁵ Other letters reference churches within Texas. Of these, many could be found southeast of Waco between Independence and Houston.⁶⁶ Of course, some of the white members entered the church by testimony and baptism. Joseph Warren Speight was among this number. During periodic protracted meetings (revivals) numerous new members joined the church.⁶⁷ One other interesting note about white membership is that a majority of white members joined as married couples and in some instances as family units. Of course, some single individuals also joined, but it was not the rule within the white membership of the church.

Although white members formed the majority within First Baptist Church, African Americans comprised about one third of the registered members in 1859.⁶⁸ Of this number, all of them appear to have been enslaved laborers.⁶⁹ Close examination of these black members reveals some very interesting perspective on the patterns of African American membership within the church which may be unexpected to some readers. Every time an African American joined the church, they were recorded in the minutes by their name and the name of their master. Some of these masters, such as Joseph Speight, were members of the church, but many were not. This means that at least some of the wealthy plantation owners in McLennan County allowed their slaves to join a church with which they themselves were not affiliated. This level of religious freedom may be unexpected, but it is supported by the minutes. Unlike their white counterparts, black members appear to have joined by themselves in larger numbers. Because only first names are listed for African American members, it is difficult to tell whether black

⁶⁵ First Baptist, Minute Books.

⁶⁶ First Baptist, Minute Books.

⁶⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 30-23.

⁶⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 126.

⁶⁹ First Baptist, Minute Books.

members were married. In some cases, a man and a woman joined at the same time and could have been a couple, but this is very difficult to determine. More often, African Americans joined the church by themselves and of these, more women joined than men.⁷⁰

The process for an African American to join the church was the same as that of white members. They either had to relate their experience of grace and be baptized, or they had to present a letter of dismissal from another Baptist church. It might be easy to imagine, that all black members came by statement, but this is also not the case. In fact, about half of the African Americans who joined the church did so by letter of dismissal.⁷¹ Moreover, some of the letters were from as far away as those of the white members who came by letter. Not only did other churches across the South view these men and women as members in good standing, but the African Americans themselves took the initiative to request letters and carry them all the way across the South. Based on the fact that often two or three people presented letters from the same church at the same time, it is reasonable to conclude that many of the African Americans who joined by letter had traveled to Texas with their masters as opposed to being sold and eventually ending up in Texas. In the latter case, it is likely that testimony and baptism was the more common method of joining. Those who did join by relating their experience faced the same scrutiny as white applicants, and if accepted, they received the same Baptism. In fact, in at least one instance, a white and a black convert were Baptized together in the same ceremony.⁷² Whether by letter or testimony, African Americans joined first Baptist in significant numbers. Although a minority in the church, fifty members was a sizable number that continued to grow.

⁷⁰ First Baptist, Minute Books; First Baptist, Roster Book.

⁷¹ First Baptist, Minute Books.

⁷² First Baptist, Minute Book A, 90.

Like most Baptist churches, First Baptist not only admitted people based on their demonstration of adherence to Baptist doctrine, they also enforced those principles with the congregation through the process of church discipline. Unlike more centrally controlled denominations, the authority to correct members resided in the church itself based on the church constitution. Within the first decade of its existence, the members of First Baptist Church had occasion to exercise discipline within the congregation, and in various cases excluded both white and black members of the congregation. As with all issues, execution of church discipline varied depending on race. Detailing some examples of these situations is necessary to form the basis for an analysis of discipline with the congregation.

As in other Baptist churches, disciplinary proceedings occurred when someone brought a charge of misconduct before the church conference. Although in some churches, members preemptively confessed in hopes of leniency, these circumstances were not recorded in the case of First Baptist Waco. It is possible that they may have occurred without record, but that is unlikely. Of the instances that did rise to the members attention, most of them were raised by other members of the congregation, because the church stressed the importance of Matthew 18. This passage instructs believers to first go to another Christian privately to address a sin or grievance. If there were no results from this meeting they were to gather a couple of witnesses and approach the offender again. Only if this failed was the issue supposed to be referred to the entire church. For this reason, it appears that cases of discipline that did rise to the attention of the entire conference of members were not a surprise. Often, the initial complaint is not even mentioned in the church minutes. An exception to this were the few cases in which two parties held claims against each other in which case both were mentioned by name.

Over the first decade of the church's existence, relatively few cases of discipline were recorded in the church minutes compared to the general expectation of nineteenth-century Baptist churches. The instances that did rise to the attention of the conference, varied from serious sins such as adultery and fornication, to being absent from the church. Conflict between church members (whether economic or personal) also came before the membership. While Baptists viewed some sins as graver than others, all instances of church discipline appear to have been taken seriously. By the time an offense reached the entire church conference, the issue was not only the initial sin, but also the refusal to repent of the sin. Therefore, even less serious offenses could still result in severe consequences if the offender was recalcitrant. A charge alone, however, was only the beginning of the process, because Baptists were so fiercely democratic. The members treated disciplinary charges similarly to legal charges, and they wanted facts and evidence before they voted on a final verdict. For this reason, most accusations triggered an investigation of the complaint before the members imposed any disciplinary measures.

Investigations followed a routine pattern that was not unique to First Baptist Church and generally featured two primary methods of gathering evidence. First, the church appointed a committee to investigate the situation. This commission included white male members of the congregation who stood in good standing with the church. Because the congregation was still relatively small during the first decade, certain individuals tended to be added to committees repeatedly. Although the pastor could serve on committees, respected lay members generally formed the core group of investigators. Upon appointment, the membership charged a committee with uncovering evidence and then reporting back to the church. Along with the

evidence, the group generally provided a recommendation to the church. Quite often, the final report was included word for word within the minute book.

Despite the seemingly straightforward nature of the committee's task, the time it took to complete the investigation varied significantly from cases to case. In some instances, the committee reported back to the church in a matter of weeks, but other inquiries stretched on for months. In the case of these longer proceedings, the committee usually presented themselves before the church conference to request more time. When the committee did finally offer a report, it usually provided a unanimous recommendation, although in one unusual case, the committee offered a split recommendation to the church. The members of the church usually followed the recommendation of the committee, but sometimes rejected the report after deliberation of the entire body. In this unusual split decision, the church rejected the recommendation and referred the investigation back to the committee.⁷³ By the end of the grueling ordeal, the composition of the committee changed multiple times as members resigned from the committee and new personal were introduced.

A second important aspect of disciplinary investigations involved the cooperation of the offender. In most cases, the church wanted to hear directly from the individual under indictment before they made their final decision. This testimony could be provided in person during a church conference (which was the preferred method), or the person under investigation could also provide a written statement to be read to the church. The statement was their opportunity to confess and ask for forgiveness or offer counter evidence to support their innocence. Of course, some members under investigation refused to cooperate, and while the church preferred to hear

⁷³ First Baptist, Minute Book B.

their testimony before making a ruling, this was not always possible. Sometimes, the church conference had to base their decision solely on the investigation of the committee.

The ever-growing number of African Americans in the church meant that eventually, cases of discipline involving black members would be addressed by the congregation. Despite the standard process for corrective proceedings within the church, race appears to have influenced the application of church discipline. Within the first ten years after First Baptist's founding, the various people faced charges on improper behavior. Interestingly, there was a clear racial distinction in what cases rose to the level of the church. White congregants faced more charges during the period than their African American counterparts.⁷⁴ These charges varied from drunken profanity to dancing. In one very interesting case from 1860, J. M. Smith the mayor of Waco who was also a member of the church faced charges of dishonoring the sabbath (apparently because he was fulfilling civic duties).⁷⁵ While these charges were serious, they did not rise to the level of gravity of a sin like adultery. Throughout the early years of the church, only one or two white members faced those charges. In addition to charges of sinful practices, disputes between two white members of the congregation also came before the church. In these cases, the church had to determine which party was in the wrong and if the parties had tried to work out the issue in the Biblical manner (from Matthew 18). If they had not, then both could face censure from the church. One other interesting note is that many of the white congregants who faced charges were men while relatively few were women, with cases involving disputes exclusively being brought by white male members of the church.

⁷⁴ First Baptist, Minute Books.

⁷⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book A.

In contrast to the white portion of the congregation, the black membership of the church faced very few disciplinary proceedings. In fact, within the early years of first Baptist Church, only three cases involving African American members are mentioned in the minutes.⁷⁶ Unlike the white cases of church discipline which skewed heavily toward male defendants, within the African American part of the church, all three accused members were female.⁷⁷ Based on the church role book, it does appear that there were more African American women than men who had joined the church, but it is still noteworthy that none of the black male members faced charges. Beyond the fact that all three cases involved black women, it is also noteworthy that all three charges involved sexual misconduct in the form of adultery or fornication.⁷⁸ In the antebellum era, such accusations were extremely grave.⁷⁹ That the church only raised these issues with the African American portion of the church could indicate that the white members of the church (or even the African American members themselves) were less concerned about less serious offense within the black community. While it would be tempting to conclude that the church was harsher toward African Americans because the charges they faced were more severe, this idea ignores the fact that in terms of both raw numbers and percentage of members African Americans within First Baptist faced fewer charges than their white counterparts.

Not only were the charges leveled against black and white members of the congregation different, the amount of text they take up in the minutes also differed. In the case of the three investigations of African Americans, only a very brief note was included in the minutes which

⁷⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 40, 59.

⁷⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 40, 59.

⁷⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 40, 59.

⁷⁹ Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

stated the charge and the results.⁸⁰ All of them seem to have been handled very quickly. By contrast, the cases involving white members usually spanned at least two meetings of the church conference. If the investigation went quickly, then a vote on the issue could occur at the next regular meeting after a complainant raised charges. However, in many instances of discipline, cases dragged on for months with one investigation ultimately lasting the better part of a year.⁸¹ Because cases involving white members spanned multiple meetings and the normal Saturday conferences at which those cases were considered garnered more detailed minutes, the total length of text devoted to white issues of discipline is much greater than that devoted to African American discipline.

A reason for the discrepancy in investigation length (and the charges themselves) appears to be that after the first few years, white members dealt with issues of discipline involving white members, and black members dealt with those cases which concerned black members. This is because early in the church's history, African Americans began holding separate services (under the authority of the church) and with their own conference following the worship service. It was at these meetings that discipline involving African American members was considered.⁸² While at least some of the white elders attended, it appears that most of the white members did not frequent these meetings.⁸³ It also seems that discipline was left to the purview of the black members, because unlike some other issues, there is no indication that votes on disciplinary issues had to be approved by the full church conference (i.e. the white membership of the

⁸⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 40, 59.

⁸¹ First Baptist, Minute Book A

⁸² First Baptist, Minute Book A, 26.

⁸³ First Baptist, Minute Books.

church).⁸⁴ Therefore, variations on charges and investigations could simply reflect the sensibilities and priorities of the two different sections of the church. Of course, these variations could also influence the results of discipline as well.

As with all other aspects of church discipline, results of the investigations also varied, but it does not appear that race played as significant a factor in the final outcome of procedures except in as much as the differences in charges was a major factor in the church's imposition of consequences. Because the white cases of discipline varied, the results were tailored to fit the crime.⁸⁵ Sometimes this did mean exclusion, but in others the church ordered restitution or censured the convicted individual.⁸⁶ These lesser penalties were especially common in cases of dispute between two members of the congregation. In some cases, such as the case against the mayor or an investigation of alleged dancing by church members, the conference levied no penalties at all. Ultimately, the penalty was intended to fit the crime. This was also true of cases involving African Americans, but because all three investigations involved a serious charge, the only legitimate outcome if convicted was exclusion. Of the cases, the conference of Black members dismissed one of the charged individuals after an investigation, while the other two cases resulted in expulsion of the guilty parties.⁸⁷ This, however, was not the end as at least one of the excluded African American women sought and received restoration into the fellowship a few years after her exclusion.⁸⁸ While it is definitely true that grave sins resulted in severe consequences, the church hoped for eventual restoration as the final outcome of the disciplinary

⁸⁴ First Baptist, Minute Books.

⁸⁵ First Baptist, Minute Books.

⁸⁶ First Baptist, Minute Books.

⁸⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 81.

⁸⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 43, 100.

process, and in the case of Mariah (who had been excluded for adultery) it worked exactly as intended when she confessed and rejoined the church in February 1860.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 33.

Chapter Three

“For the Benefit of the Coloured Population” Leadership and Authority in First Baptist

Throughout the first decade of First Baptist Waco’s existence, African Americans became an increasingly prominent and vibrant part of the congregation. While black members remained under the authority of the church during the 1850s (meaning that they were under the leadership of white pastors and elders), they did make significant strides toward autonomous action and self-leadership during the period. They did not achieve complete independence during the founding era of the church, but they set themselves on a path toward self-determination which would come to fruition in the wake of the American Civil War. The development of a separate service for African American congregants and the election of black men to important positions of leadership within the church proved to be important steps along this progression. In order to understand this process, it is first necessary to examine church offices that white members of the congregation held during the first decade of the church’s existence.

Even though the lay members of Baptist churches exercised great authority through their ability to vote, this does not mean that leadership within the church was unimportant. Baptist churches generally called their pastors for a year at a time, but these men often served for multi-year tenures.¹ The church could vote to remove them or choose to call a new pastor, but because they preached regularly to the congregation and served as the chairman for church meetings, they often held great power even within the democratic framework. Alongside the pastor, elders

¹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 25.

provided leadership within the church. While pastors could come and go, elders often stayed within the same congregation for years. These men usually exercised great influence over the congregation and led committees that the membership often created to investigate specific issues.² Most churches also maintained deacons who served the congregation and a church clerk who recorded the events of church meetings. These men may not have possessed the influence of the pastor and other elders, but they helped to ensure that the church functioned as it was intended. These leaders worked within a democratic framework, but they were essential to its processes.

Leadership helped to shape the direction of the church in the first decade of existence. Many of the initiatives which helped the church to expand can be directly attributed to the leadership of the senior pastors. During the founding era of the church, three men served as pastor to the congregation. Over time, the leadership of First Baptist also transferred to several different pastors. After helping found the fellowship, Noah T. Byars led the church through 1853.³ During this time, the church only met once a month and Byars himself helped plant other churches in the region on weekends that First Baptist Waco did not meet. Nevertheless, under his leadership the church grew from four members to at least thirty.⁴ After a couple years in Waco, Byars felt called to move further west to plant more churches across Texas. He was at heart a missionary and spent his life in this pursuit eventually moving deep into central Texas where he planted his last church in Brownwood.⁵

² First Baptist, Minute Book A, found throughout.

³ First Baptist, Minute Book A; *Handbook of Waco; History of the Waco Baptists*.

⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A.

⁵ Kelley, *Handbook of Waco*; Walker, *History of the Waco Baptists*.

After Byars, the church elected Solomon G. O'Bryan to be the second pastor. Before moving to Waco, he had studied at Wake Forrest and then pastored the Baptist church at Independence, TX.⁶ After arriving in McClennan County, he led the church through five critical years of growth and expansion from 1854-1859. Early in his pastorate, he led the congregation to build its own house of worship as has already been discussed, this was an immensely important step forward for the church. He then helped oversee the revision of the church constitution. One other major change that will be discussed in more detail later which also occurred while O'Bryan was the pastor was the creation of a separate service for African Americans.⁷ This had significant ramifications for the entire church but particularly affected the black members of the congregation.

In 1860 the church elected a new man to serve as the pastor: W. H. Bayliss. By this time, Bayliss was already a respected Baptist preacher who had pastored a large church in Nashville, Tennessee, and been offered (but declined) a pastorate in New York City.⁸ His time in Waco only spanned a few years, but during his tenure, two black members were first confirmed to preach and began serving as exhorters in the African American service.⁹ This was a major step for the African American community in First Baptist Church which will be discussed in much more detail later. Bayliss also helped to organize the Waco Baptist Association, which became an important hub for the Baptists in Central Texas.

One of the greatest points of racial disparity in antebellum Baptist churches was the realm of leadership. In mixed congregations, pastors and elders were surely exclusively white men.

⁶ Kelley, *Handbook of Waco*; Walker, *History of the Waco Baptists*.

⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 26.

⁸ Kelley, *Handbook of Waco*; Walker, *History of the Waco Baptists*.

⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 34.

Black members may or may not have maintained the right to vote in Baptist churches, but they were not looked to for leadership. This too is significant, because Baptists were generally the most comfortable with less well-educated clergy.¹⁰ A poor man with little education could become a Baptist preacher in the antebellum era. Nevertheless, most whites believed that African Americans were not equipped (either by nature or condition) to serve as pastors or elders. Some were not even comfortable with black men pastoring African American congregations as they feared that the gospel would not be shared accurately or that it could foment rebellion among African Americans.¹¹ Despite being more equal and more unified than many other denominations, Southern Baptists remained a product of their time and culture. Within First Baptist Waco this status quo began to shift with the creation of a separate Sunday evening service for African Americans.

For the first three years, it appears that Cato and the other African American members worshiped with the white congregation, but this changed in 1854.¹² The minutes include the first direct reference to a separate service for African Americans in an entry dated March of 1864. Because it mentions the meeting as “the services held on Sunday afternoon for the benefit of the coloured population,” it is unclear exactly when this service became a regular part of the church’s calendar.¹³ It is clear that from that point forward, the “coloured service” occurred on Sunday evening after the main (white) service had happened in the morning.¹⁴ During the period in which the white members met monthly or biweekly, the African Americans would have met on the same schedule. Therefore, when the church increased its activity to weekly meetings, the

¹⁰ Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 50.

¹¹ Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 186.

¹² First Baptist, Minute Book A, 26.

¹³ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 26.

¹⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 26.

separate service for African Americans also would have occurred every Saturday. While it is easy to observe this change in the minutes, the institution of a separate time of worship begs the questions of why the church decided to have a separate service and what denominational precedent (if any) impacted the decision.

The extant church documents do not explicitly provide a clear reason why First Baptist began holding separate services for African Americans, but some clues within the text as well as the context of the era provide significant data to consider the decision. The most important statement included in the minutes can be found in the entry which first addresses the African American service. The clerk describes the meetings as “exclusively for the benefit of the coloured population.”¹⁵ This phrasing indicates that from the white perspective, holding a separate service was designed to benefit to black members of the church, but this could mean several different things. It could refer to the fact that a separate service would allow sermons to be tailored to the black community. While this may sound good, it could possess insidious undertones as those sermons likely stressed obedience and subservience as most plantation meetings did.¹⁶ However, the phrase could also mean something less sinister. Early on, white elders and often the pastor himself led the second service. This situation meant that they may have to preach twice on a Sunday and had virtually the whole day tied up with worship.¹⁷ For this reason, the service was likely viewed as something of a burden on the white leadership of the church. By no means does the text indicate that it was a task that they only did begrudgingly, but

¹⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 26.

¹⁶ Jones, *Religious Instruction of the Negroes*; Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*; Randolph, “Plantation Churches.”

¹⁷ First Baptist, Minute Books.

the phrasing does suggest that it was an extra duty which they chose to perform not for their own benefit but for the black members and congregants in the church.

The phrasing in the minutes also rules out the idea that having a separate service was designed to please the white congregants by removing the black members from their presence. For modern readers who remember the segregated South of the early twentieth century, the civil rights movement of the sixties, and ongoing racial tension in the present day, this might be the most likely assumption, but it does not correspond with the reality of the antebellum South. During the early nineteenth century, southern whites were suspicious of separate African American religious experiences. Most preferred enslaved black Christians to worship within white dominated congregations.¹⁸ This was because they were afraid that independent services could lead to slave rebellion and open strife. Most white southerners were also very skeptical of African American religious leadership. Many contended that black Christians while they could be sincere in their faith were not educationally or intellectually equipped to properly interpret and preach the word of God.¹⁹ When white southerners did endorse services specifically for enslaved African Americans, it was usually in the context of white supervision and leadership. Nevertheless, the move to have a separate service within First Baptist Waco, cut against the grain of prevailing practices. It would have been easier for the white members of the church to simply hold one service. The fact that they did not indicates that they were putting some thought into what they believed was best for the church including the African American members. Obviously, their motives may have been very paternalistic (especially by modern standards), but that does not mean that they were not sincere. History is full of examples of people doing the

¹⁸ Jones, *Religious Instruction of the Negroes*; Randolph, "Plantation Churches."

¹⁹ Jones, *Religious Instruction of the Negroes*.

right thing for the wrong reasons or the wrong thing for the right reasons. Just because someone is wrong, does not mean that they are insincere; not every bad choice has a sinister motive.

The African American members of the church likely enjoyed the opportunity to meet separately from the white congregation even if it still included a sermon from the pastor of the church. Although separation created a divide within the community, it also provided the opportunity (or at least the hope of) more autonomy and self-determination for the black members of the church. Having a set forum, provided them with an outlet to raise concerns and push for changes within the church that was outside of the normal Saturday meetings. In addition to the fact that these meetings would have been dominated by the white members, many African American members likely could not have attended due to their status as enslaved laborers. As will be seen, over the course of the 1850s, black members used their service as a platform to advance their own agenda sometimes coming into conflict with the white members of the church.²⁰ The fact that based on the wording in the minutes all but possibly one of the black members of First Baptist were held as enslaved laborers also meant that they likely welcomed a separate service because it was an means in which they could congregate with less white interreference. This provided a refuge from the white domination that was present in almost every other part of their lives. Because contact between white and black Southerners was an ever present and humiliating reality, many African Americans looked for opportunities to separate themselves from the white population.²¹ Although the original black members of First Baptist Church did not leave records to state this definitively, it is likely that they welcomed and possibly even had asked for a separate service.

²⁰ First Baptist, Minute Books.

²¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll*; Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*; etc.

In practice, the African American services within First Baptist Church were similar to the meetings attended by the white members of the congregation. They included a sermon, praying, and singing.²² Before the first reference to the African American service in the entry for March 1854, if a separate worship service occurred, it was only a service. The reason that 1854 was so important for the development of African American religion in First Baptist church is because that is when the church delegated power to the members at the African American service to vote on the issue of fellowship (allowing new members to join the church).²³ From that point forward, it appears that a conference meeting like the general church meeting which occurred on Saturdays always happened after the Sunday evening service. While some white members did attend, the majority with this service were the black members of the church. Effectively, this meant that the African American members of the church had the authority to oversee the admission of new black members. After March 1854, the minutes include separate entries for these African American meetings.

While the decision from March 1854, delegated the power over fellowship to the African American conference, issues of fellowship were not the only items discussed by the black members of the church. They quickly began addressing issues of church discipline within the African American membership of the church.²⁴ This expansion is logical, because discipline is very closely associated with voting to induct new members into the fellowship. Whether intended or not, the black conference also became a forum for discussion of other issues as well. While the entries for the African American services are generally much shorter than those for the

²² First Baptist, Minute Books.

²³ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 26.

²⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 40.

main church conferences, over the course of the 1850s, several entries indicate the increasing activity of the black membership. Most notable among these efforts was a push for more leadership. In 1858, the African American members elected two black men to serve as deacons for the black community.²⁵ Naturally, the church already had several white men who had been elected to the office of deacon, but they either did not serve the African American members or they did not do so satisfactorily. After a lengthy process that will be discussed below, the first African American deacon, a man named Joe, was ordained. Joe had been a member of the church for about a year at the time of his ordination after having joined the church by letter (possibly with his wife).²⁶ It appears that he likely arrived in Waco shortly before he joined the church, because several other African Americans joined the church at the same time, and all are listed as “servants of Bro. Speight” (clearly referencing Joseph Warren Speight). Between 1858 and the beginning of the Civil War, a second man joined Joe as a deacon for the black members of First Baptist Church.²⁷

The appointment of African American deacons was an extremely significant development for First Baptist Waco, but it was eclipsed by the transition that occurred in preaching during the Sunday evening services. From 1854 to 1859, white elders always preached to the African American congregation. Usually, the elder serving as pastor of the church preached, but sometimes a different elder would offer the sermon.²⁸ Whoever preached also moderated the

²⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 70.

²⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 40.

²⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 63.

²⁸ In Baptist churches of the mid-nineteenth century, it appears that being appointed an elder was a prerequisite for being called to pastor a church at least within congregations that wanted to be in fellowship with other Baptist churches.

meeting held immediately following the service.²⁹ Interestingly, the first hint that this standard might change did not occur during an African American meeting (at least not that was recorded). In October 1859, the Saturday church conference appointed a committee to consider the idea of approving black men to preach in the African American service.³⁰ The church charged the committee, which included Brothers Arnold, Crain, and Speight, with two specific tasks. First, they were to consider whether it would be appropriate for any black members to serve as a preacher. Second, they were to examine a couple of African American men who had “profess[ed] a call to the ministry.”³¹

This event demonstrates several facts about the growth and vibrance of the African American community within First Baptist and its relationship with the white portion of the congregation. Clearly, the initial move for African American preaching came from within the African American community, specifically, the men who expressed a desire to serve as ministers.³² These men (like the men who had already been examined for the position of deacon) were exploring their faith and working to exercise their spiritual gifts. A church that is healthy not only has people in attendance, but it also expresses this kind of spiritual exploration and development. Perhaps it is not (or at least should not be) surprising that black members of the church sought to exercise their spiritual gifts. What is interesting is the response of the white members of the church. Not only did they form an investigatory committee, but they included some of the most respected white men in the church on that committee. This indicates that the took the request seriously. Likely, the members of the committee would not only have talked

²⁹ First Baptist, Minute Books.

³⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 21.

³¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 21.

³² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 21.

with black members of the church, but they also would have sought guidance from conversations with or at least the writings of leaders in the wider Baptist community. It is somewhat amazing that in the context of an era in which black leadership in the church (especially among those who were still held in slavery) was looked upon very skeptically by many southern white Christians, First Baptist Church of Waco took the issue very seriously.

Apparently, the committee took some time to work, because the next reference to African American preachers does not occur in the minutes until the entry for February 1860.³³ At that time, the African American conference, unanimously approved an enslaved African American named Stephen to preach to them causing the matter to be referred to the regular church conference.³⁴ It is unclear if the investigatory committee had already finished its work and had given the African American conference the go ahead or if the black members of the church were using their unanimous support to force the hand of the white members of the congregation. From the context, Brother Stephen was clearly one of the men who had expressed a call to ministry, so it is likely that the committee was already supportive of his call. At the regular meeting in March, the committee recommended and the church unanimously approved Stephen's (along with another man named Ben) call to preach to the African American service. However, they also passed a resolution that from that point forward, only approved black men could preach.³⁵ It is likely, that they did not want their specific approval of Stephen and Ben to be construed as a blanket approval of African American preaching in general. There were undoubtedly some in the congregation who were still uncomfortable with the idea of an enslaved

³³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 34.

³⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 34.

³⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 34.

African American serving as a preacher and it is possible that the resolution was part of a compromise to ensure the approval of Stephen and Ben.

Of the two African Americans who were approved by the regular church conference, it appears that Stephen was much more active and although he did not know it at the time, he would be the one to play the most significant role in the African American Baptist community in Waco. As with most enslaved people, it is difficult to trace Stephen's early history, but he is notable in the minutes for First Baptist Church even before he became the first African American preacher in the congregation. He had first joined the church in June 1859 by testimony after being baptized by Pastor S. G. O'Bryan.³⁶ It is likely that Stephen had been in the Waco community for some time before, because the minutes note that he had previously been part of the Methodist society and that he was "the servant of J[ohn] A Cobbs" who served as a judge and was well established in the community.³⁷ Although still held in servitude, it appears that Stephen was literate and possessed significant knowledge of both the Bible and Baptist doctrines. After his call, it seems that he preached some throughout the rest of 1860, before being called by the African American conference to be the regular, weekly preacher in January 1861 for that calendar year.³⁸

Amid all the growth, the black and white members of First Baptist church settled into an unequal but working relationship. Because authority in the church rested with the white dominated main Saturday church conference, the African American members of the church had to work with the white members even as they asserted more independence and self-leadership. By the middle of the 1850s, discussions of fellowship, discipline, and leadership were all being

³⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 118.

³⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 118.

³⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 68.

initiated by the African American conference, but the amount that the white portion of the congregation weighed in on these matters varied from issue to issue.

The area in which the African American members maintained the most complete authority was the realm of fellowship. Although the initial black members had joined at the integrated Saturday conferences, the 1854 decision to allow those present at the black members' Sunday evening service to decide on the suitability of new black applicants was a major turning point in the history of the church. From that point forward, only one issue of fellowship involving an African American came before the all-white Saturday church meeting. This case was highly unusual, because it involved Nathaniel Parker who appears to be the only free black member of the church.³⁹ Unlike all enslaved African Americans, no master is listed after his name and he is listed with both a first and last name. If he were enslaved, these notes would have been present in the minutes. Nevertheless, he is said to be a "man of color."⁴⁰ The case is even more complicated by the fact that the 1860 Federal Census for McLennan County does not include a record for a "colored" Nathaniel Parker.⁴¹ There is a man named Nathaniel Parker in the census records who is listed as a farmer who owned real estate valued at \$2000; however, he is not listed as either "Black" or "Mulatto."⁴² It is likely that the man listed in the First Baptist minutes is the same individual listed in the census, but if so, it is unclear why there was a discrepancy between the two records. The other highly unusual aspect of Parker's membership

³⁹ The legibility of this name is difficult to read. It could be some other derivative of Nathaniel.

⁴⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 114.

⁴¹ 1860 Federal Census, McLennan County.

⁴² In the 1860 census (at least for McLennan County), persons were assumed to be white unless otherwise noted.

is that while he is mentioned in the minutes, he is not listed in the church roster book under either his first or last name.⁴³

Regardless of this mystery, Parker was likely the only free African American in the church. It is unclear whether he regularly attended services with the white congregation or the Sunday evening meetings with the other black members. While it is possible that he regularly attended both sessions, it is also plausible that he viewed the Sunday morning service as the “free” service and eschewed the Sunday evening service. The fact that he brought his case before the regular Saturday church meeting lends credibility to this idea. Other than the unique case of Nathaniel Parker, no regular Saturday conference considered other issues of fellowship regarding black members during the first decade of the church’s existence. Although they still held ultimate authority in the church over matters of fellowship, the minutes offer no indication that they interfered with the decisions of the African American conference in this regard after affirming their authority in the matter in 1854.⁴⁴

Because matters of discipline were directly linked to fellowship, the white members of the church also left these cases to the purview of African American conference. As stated, all three cases of discipline involving black members recorded between 1851 and 1861, were dealt with by the Sunday evening meeting.⁴⁵ The first case (in which a woman named Mariah was excluded for adultery), only received one sentence in the minutes.⁴⁶ Several years later, the congregation readmitted (restored) Mariah during a period of revival.⁴⁷ The other two cases

⁴³ First Baptist, Roster Book.

⁴⁴ First Baptist, Minute Books.

⁴⁵ First Baptist, Minute Books.

⁴⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 43.

⁴⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 33.

garnered more attention in the minutes, but again only on entries related to the African American meetings. In both cases, one female African American member levied charges against another (one adultery and the other fornication).⁴⁸ Neither case was decided during the meeting in which it was originally raised, and ultimately, one party was found guilty and excluded while the other case was dismissed.⁴⁹

Although some white members were likely present at these proceedings, none of the cases were referred to the regular Saturday meeting. Like voting on members, the issues of excluding black members also rested with the vote of the African American meetings. It is notable, that the minutes only record three serious cases involving black members. This could indicate that African Americans maintained slightly different standards than their white counterparts, but it could also simply be a function of the fact that there were fewer African American members. Regardless, the will of the African American population dictated the course of discipline involving black members of the church.

The area in which there was the most friction between the two halves of the congregation was the issues of leadership within black community. While ultimate authority in the church rested in the full body of the church membership, the white pastor and elders largely shaped the direction of the church. After gaining their own service, the black community within the church began to seek more leadership, but unlike issues of fellowship and discipline, this development met some resistance from the white membership of the church. While membership was addressed without the direct oversight of the regular church conference, matters of leadership almost always garnered their attention. Over the course of the 1850s, black men were eventually

⁴⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 59.

⁴⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 81,100.

elected to three offices: sexton, deacon, and preacher/exhorter. All three of these positions demonstrate the complex relationship between the white and black membership of First Baptist Church.

Like other offices in First Baptist Church of Waco, the regular meeting voted to fill the post as sexton each year after the construction of their own church building. Generally, the church took an offering to provide monetary compensation to the man who was installed in the position.⁵⁰ This means that the sexton was one of only two officers in the church who received payment for services rendered. The position was never addressed by the Sunday evening meeting, but that does not mean that he had no significance for African Americans. The original sexton of the church appears to have been a white man, but in January 1860, the church voted to install a black man named McCoy in the office.⁵¹ Furthermore, it appears that as with previous sextons, he received monetary compensation. Surprisingly, he was not a free man. This means that an enslaved African American received payment for a job that was not in service to his own master. While it is unclear exactly how this relationship was handled, the fact that the church appointed McCoy demonstrates that they trusted him to fulfill the duties of the position.

Another very important position which African Americans filled during the founding years of the church was the office of deacon. Within the church structure, deacons are the men who serve the community. This can entail everything from calling on the sick to providing for the widows and orphans in the church. Unlike the position of sexton, African Americans initiated the appointment of black deacons. In 1858, Brothers Abram and Ben received a call

⁵⁰ FBC Minutes.

⁵¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 32.

from the African American meeting to serve as deacons for the black members.⁵² Unlike matters of fellowship, this action needed approval of the regular conference. Despite this extra step, there does not appear to have been too much resistance within the white membership to the idea of black deacons. They examined both men during the regular conference and eventually ordained Abram as a deacon in May 1858.⁵³ Although it appears that Ben also met with approval, there is no record that he was ever actually ordained. A couple years later, the African American members selected another man named Boling to serve them as a deacon.⁵⁴ Unlike the first deacons, this man did not meet with approval of the white members. Instead, they recommended a different man for the office. In turn, the black members rejected the recommendation and offered Brother Henry, a third candidate. Henry faced the examination of the regular conference and received ordination two months later in October 1861.⁵⁵ This episode demonstrates that the white members maintained control of leadership in the church, but it is important to note that they did not force their choice on the African American community. Instead, through a back-and-forth process, a candidate who pleased both groups ultimately took the position.

While black deacons had to meet with and receive approval from the regular conference, the concept of African Americans filling that office does not seem to have been particularly controversial. This was not the case with the movement to call black men to preach to the congregation. By October 1859, at least one African American man (presumably Stephen Cobb)

⁵² First Baptist, Minute Book A, 70.

⁵³ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 77.

⁵⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 49.

⁵⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 63.

had expressed a call to preach.⁵⁶ This prompted not just an examination of the specific individuals, but also a broader consideration of the very idea of black preachers. Ultimately, the white members concluded that African American men could preach, but only if pre-approved by the regular church conference.⁵⁷ This decision came after the African American conference leant Stephen their unanimous support.⁵⁸ It appears that he may already have been preaching some even before official approval, because the committee had “witnessed the exercise of his gifts.”⁵⁹ One very important distinction is that the men who the regular conference approved to preach were not ordained as pastors. The African American congregation was still considered to be a part of First Baptist Church, and the church could only have one pastor.⁶⁰ Also, ordaining a black man as a pastor or elder could theoretically give them authority over white members, and this was not something the white membership was prepared to do. For this reason, the pastor or other white elders continued to perform baptisms even for African American converts.⁶¹ Despite this distinction, the approval of Stephen and at least one other man to preach during the Sunday evening service was a important step forward for the community and helped to prepare Stephen and the other black members for all that was set to unfold in the years to come.

⁵⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 21.

⁵⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 34.

⁵⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 34.

⁵⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 34.

⁶⁰ At that point, churches did not generally have multiple pastors as many modern churches do.

⁶¹ First Baptist, Minute Books.

Chapter Four

“Acceding to . . . The Confederate States” The Coming of the Civil War

The secession crisis and the Civil War which followed was a national calamity that reverberated down through states to the local level. As in every community in Texas, citizens of Waco (and McLennan County more broadly) had to wrestle with the issues of the crisis and react accordingly. Although far from the frontlines of the war, Waco was hardly immune to the effects of the great national conflict. Within First Baptist Church, the shadow of the war disrupted the status quo in numerous ways. From the departure of key individuals to shifts in patterns of membership and discipline to renewed conflict over leadership and authority, the war's ripples created turmoil within the church. Before addressing these issues, it is first necessary to understand the broader context of Waco's response to the secession crisis. Although many in the state ardently supported secession, some groups of Texans and some members of the leadership of Texas opposed disunion. Virtually every Southern state contained pockets of unionist sentiment, and Texas was no exception.¹ Whether people supported the Union or the movement to secede depended on a variety of factors including their place of origin, their occupation, and the part of Texas in which they lived.

By 1860, there were some young adults who had been born in Texas and lived there for their entire life, but most adults in Texas still hailed from other locales.² These places fostered cultures that the immigrants carried with them to Texas. Many white Texans came from other parts of the American South. Although this region was not perfectly uniform and contained a

¹ Walter L. Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 121.

² Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 207-208.

variety of cultural groups, it is safe to say that most Texans from the broader South supported both slavery and the secession movement. It is true that not all White Southerners (or even a majority) owned enslaved African Americans, but this fact can be used to underestimate how important slavery was to most of the white southern population.³ White southerners who did not own slaves, could (and usually did) aspire to do so.⁴ Moreover, white southerners who did not directly participate in slavery, still benefited from being part of the slave owning population.⁵ For these reasons, white Texans who had migrated from the South (particularly the deep South) generally supported secession.

Despite the majority position, there were people who lived in the South who did not support disunion. These individuals tended to live in the upper south and border states. While their distaste for secession should not be construed as opposition to slavery, many of these individuals worked to keep their states from leaving the Union.⁶ During the waves of immigration to Texas before and after the Texas Revolution, some of these pro-union Southerners had migrated to Texas. One of the most notable members of this group was Sam Houston. Famous for his leadership during the Texas Revolution, Houston served as governor of Texas at the time of the secession crisis. He and others like him resisted the secession movement in Texas.⁷

The majority of mid-nineteenth century Texans came from the American South, but some came from more distant regions. Most notable among these were the Germans who lived in

³ Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 190.

⁴ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 79-80.

⁵ Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 338.

⁶ Kenneth W. Howell, Editor. *The Seventh Star of the Confederacy: Texas during the Civil War* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2009), 46-47.

⁷ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 241-242.

central Texas. They formed tight-knit communities in the hill country where they maintained many of their German practices and customs. Unlike white Southerners, most of these migrants did not own slaves and did not support secession. A few immigrants to Texas who also differed from the majority were those born in New England. While they composed only a small number of Texans in 1860, they had significant influence in certain pockets of the state. For example, a group of New Englanders had migrated to Galveston in the 1840s where they formed First Baptist Church of Galveston. While these New Englanders were unlikely abolitionists, most of them would not have supported secession.

Profession was another important factor that influenced the ideology of white Texans. Most men who owned plantations likely to supported secession. They were the most dependent on slavery for their economic and social status. Because of their wealth and status, planters wielded a disproportionate amount of influence in their communities. They often held leadership positions such as serving as county judges.⁸ As with the planter class in other states, these men often took a vocal lead in advocating for disunion.⁹

Beneath the wealthy planters, other groups within Texan society had less motivation to support disunion. Within the growing cities and towns, professionals (such as doctors or lawyers) who supported themselves through their practices, had less direct dependence on slavery. Despite this, they still ranked among the wealthier people in their societies and worked closely with planters who lived on the periphery of their towns. Because their status was not directly tied to slavery (unless they held plantations in addition to the profession), it is likely that

⁸ Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas*, 12.

⁹ Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas*, 12.

other factors such as place of origin or location in Texas had more impact on their support or opposition to disunion than their vocation.

Lower class men who owned small farms or worked for others likely had the least investment in politics in general and secession in particular. Like the professionals, people in this stratum of society were likely influenced by other factors more than their work. This does not mean, however, that such individuals did not support Texas or the Confederacy. Indeed, many men from small farms joined the Confederate army.

One last factor which had a major influence on people's attitude toward secession was location within Texas. Some regions within Texas heavily favored secession while others largely opposed the idea. This difference was naturally linked to the type of work and the primary place of origin of the residents, but it could also influence people who moved to the region who did not fit with the majority.

As more Texans supported the Confederacy than opposed it, it is not surprising that many areas of Texas contained populations that mostly supported secession. This was particularly true of regions that supported largescale-agriculture and plantations. People in counties which had fertile cropland due to Texas' major rivers largely supported the Confederacy. When Texas held its vote to secede, these counties overwhelmingly supported the measure. It is no surprise that these areas trended toward secession as they had the highest concentration of both people who had migrated from the Lower South and wealthy plantation owners (by Texas standards). Those in these regions who did not fit into either of those categories would have felt tremendous pressure to support the South.

Within the majority pro-secession state, there were regions which contained population who largely opposed the idea. The most notable pocket of Unionism was in the German

dominated communities of the hill country in Central Texas. Most of these people had grown up in a very different culture than that of their neighbors from the American South. They generally did not own enslaved people or support the practice. Moreover, they had moved to America to escape Europe and supported the maintenance of the national government. Another key area of unionism was along the gulf coast where people from all over the world entered Texas.

A few areas of Texas contained a more balanced mix of unionists and proslavery partisans. Such regions were inherently dangerous during the stressful and chaotic times of the secession winter. Several significant instances of violence occurred (particularly against minority Unionists). One troubled region was North Texas.¹⁰ Today, this part of Texas boasts two of the largest cities in the state and a massive total population, but at the time of the Civil War, the region was much more sparsely populated. Of the people who lived in the area, the majority supported secession, but there was also a significant number of Unionists. The conflict between these groups ultimately resulted in violence. The most notable atrocity was a lynching in Gainesville, Texas sometimes called the “Great Hanging.”¹¹ Forty-two men accused of being Unionists died at the hands of those who supported the Confederacy.

Before moving from general trends to Waco itself, one very important factor concerning Texas’ secession movement must also be addressed. Unlike most other Southern states in which secession almost certainly meant joining with other seceding states to form a Southern confederacy, this outcome was not assumed among Texas secessionists. Texans who pushed to leave the Union included both those who wanted to join the newly forming Confederate States,

¹⁰ Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas*, 68-70.

¹¹ McCaslin, *Great Hanging at Gainesville*; Kelley, *Handbook of Texas*.

and those who wanted to recreate an independent Republic of Texas.¹² With this division in mind, the fact that the majority of Texans wanted to secede is clear, but it is not clear that the majority of Texans wanted to join the Confederacy. One piece of evidence for this division is the vocal partisan Gideon Linsecum who regretted his decision to advocate for secession after he realized that Texas was going to join the Confederacy.¹³ Some historians even suggest that if the idea of renewed independence was not on the table, then the vote to leave the Union might have been different. Given how lopsided the vote tally was, this seems like a stretch, but the argument does highlight the point that there was a significant division within the secessionist ranks in Texas.

In comparison to other parts of Texas, the city of Waco and the surrounding community predominantly supported the secessionist movement.¹⁴ The nature of Wacoites should not be surprising given the places of origin and dominant professions in the region. As has already been seen, the climate and geography of McLennan County suited it to large scale agriculture and had attracted a number of wealthy planters from other parts of the South as well as other Southerners who aspired to gain land and join the planter class. As the community developed, the town itself did contain professionals who did not work in agriculture, but many of these individuals owned enslaved African Americans for work in their houses. In short, Waco and the immediate vicinity were direct participants in the practices of the deep South. As the secession crisis heated up, a significant majority of white adults in McLennan County supported the movement.

¹² Joe T. Timmons, "The Referendum in Texas on the Ordinance of Secession, February 23, 1861: The Vote," *East Texas Historical Journal*, Vol. 11, no. 2, Article 6, 13.

¹³ Timmons, "The Referendum in Texas," 13-14.

¹⁴ Timmons, "The Referendum in Texas," 15.

Despite this, the desire for disunion was not unanimous, as some Wacoites including prominent people in the community opposed secession. Most notable in this group was the recently arrived pastor and college president Rufus C. Burleson.¹⁵ Although from the South, Burleson was a close acquaintance of arguably the most ardent unionist in the state. Before moving to Waco, he had served as the pastor of the Baptist Church in Independence, Texas, where he had baptized and mentored Sam Houston.¹⁶ Houston, of course, was a living legend in Texas. He had served as the general of Texas forces during the revolution, President of the Republic of Texas, and was serving as governor of the state during the secession crisis.¹⁷ Despite his support of slavery, he had been a devotee and close friend of former president Andrew Jackson.¹⁸ One of the key features of Jacksonian Democracy was ardent support of the federal government and the Constitution. With such a strong influence, it is not surprising that Burleson and a few others like him from Independence did not favor disunion.

In addition to the contingent from Independence, there were others who opposed secession. As with the rest of the state, occupation, place of origin, and direct participation in slavery all played a role in the decision to support or oppose secession. Although atypical, one example is George Barnard from New England.¹⁹ Although in the South, he almost certainly would have been in the camp of unionists present in the county. More generally, the city of

¹⁵ The outline of Dr. Burleson's life is sketched or at least referenced in several sources including: William Cathcart ed., *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, vol 1. reprint. (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1881), 164 and Georgia J. Burleson, ed. *The Life And Writings Of Rufus C. Burleson*. reprinting. (London: Forgotten Books, 1901).

¹⁶ Robert Andrew Baker, *The Blossoming Desert: A Concise History of Texas Baptists* (Word Books, 1970), 114.

¹⁷ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 233.

¹⁸ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2007), 669.

¹⁹ Conger, *Pictorial History of Waco*, 20.

Waco also boasted a growing number of businessmen and other professionals who likely opposed secession. Because few letters remain and the vote to leave the Union was held by secret ballot, it is almost impossible to say with certainty which citizens of Waco would have preferred to stay in the Union. Nevertheless, the vote (which will be considered in more detail later) indicates that a significant minority of people from Waco opposed secession.²⁰

One other important factor complicates an analysis of who in Waco maintained loyalty to the Union. As the area was clearly dominated by a vocal pro-secession majority, those who were not secessionists undoubtedly feared the potential consequences of vocal support for the Union. Although violence did not plague McLennan County as it did other parts of the state, reports from other areas and a few specific cases in Waco itself created a constant threat of violence. This threat was reinforced by the partisan newspaper in Waco which published many editions in support of secession.²¹ Unionists in Waco were, therefore, not as vocal as their counterparts in other parts of the State.

The most violent and graphic display of pro-secessionist sentiment in McLennan County corresponded with Sam Houston's visit to the area during the height of the argument over secession. While many in the state ardently supported secession, there were vocal Unionists who did what they could to keep Texas in the United States. Most notable among these was Sam Houston, the governor of the state.²² He passionately believed that the best course for Texas was to remain in the Union and worked hard to bring that outcome to pass. It was his initiative that drove state officials to call for a general election to answer the question of secession.²³ With the

²⁰ Timmons, "The Referendum in Texas," 15.

²¹ Kelley, *Handbook of Waco*, 280.

²² Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas*, 123.

²³ Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas*, 141.

vote looming, Houston actively campaigned against secession. As with many leaders of his day, this was primarily carried out through letters, but he also traveled around the state to stump for his position. It was during this campaign that he arrived in Waco to speak to a large crowd.²⁴

To say the meeting did not go well would be an understatement. Upon arrival, he presented his speech at Methodist Church which had the largest auditorium in the community.²⁵ People filled the church to hear him speak, while others crowded outside. Many probably wanted to hear his position, but some simply wanted to protest his Unionist sentiments. As the speech progressed, the crowd outside became progressively more raucous, until by the end, they could be described as a mob.²⁶ While some in the community undoubtedly appreciated the speech, clearly the majority of those present wanted him to leave and to take his ideas with him. After completing the oration, Sam Houston retired to his lodgings for the night, but that did not end the conflict or satisfy the rowdy crowd.

During the evening after the speech, the crowd formed into a mob. Although the exact intentions are unclear, it is evident that at least some in the mob wished to lynch Sam Houston. Others may simply have wished to run him out of town.²⁷ As there were locals who were close to Houston, word of the danger reached him before the mob did. As much as the old soldier would have likely wanted to stand his ground, he took the advice of his supporters and fled from Waco before the Mob could reach him.²⁸ With this, those in the crowd who wanted him dead lost their chance, but those who simply wanted to drive him away had clearly succeeded. The

²⁴ Robert Elder, et al, "Waco During the Civil War," *Waco History Podcast* (Waco: Rogue Media Network, 2019).

²⁵ Elder, "Waco During the Civil War," *Waco History Podcast*.

²⁶ Elder, "Waco During the Civil War," *Waco History Podcast*.

²⁷ Elder, "Waco During the Civil War," *Waco History Podcast*.

²⁸ Elder, "Waco During the Civil War," *Waco History Podcast*.

people of Waco made their position clear through mob action, and they would soon do so with their votes.

On February 23, 1861, Texans went to the polls to consider the question of secession.²⁹ Given the context, it is not surprising that when a vote on secession finally did occur, Wacoites voted in favor of the proposition. Nevertheless, the results were far from unanimous. The final tally registered 586 votes for secession in the county with 191 opposed.³⁰ These numbers demonstrate that approximately 75 percent of those who participated cast their votes for secession. Although this is a sizable majority, it does mean that those opposed constituted a significant minority of 25 percent. Interestingly, when compared to the numbers for the whole state, McLennan County very nearly mirrored the vote counts for the state.³¹ Across Texas, about seventy-six percent of the vote supported secession. This means that to some degree the division in Waco can serve as a microcosm of the division in the state. It must be noted that these percentages did not hold true across all Texas counties with many registering almost unanimous votes for secession.³² Conversely, a few with very ardent pockets of unionism register impressive majorities against secession.³³

Another significant facet of the referendum is a consideration of voter turnout. In Waco, about eighty percent of eligible voters participated in the election.³⁴ In this regard, McLennan County diverged significantly from the state average which rested at about sixty percent.³⁵ The

²⁹ Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas*, 159.

³⁰ Timmons, "The Referendum in Texas," 15.

³¹ Timmons, "The Referendum in Texas," 15.

³² Timmons, "The Referendum in Texas," 15; Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas*, 164.

³³ Timmons, "The Referendum in Texas," 15.

³⁴ Timmons, "The Referendum in Texas," 18.

³⁵ Timmons, "The Referendum in Texas," 19.

turnout in McLennan demonstrates the investment of the people of the county in the outcome of the contest. When compared to the presidential election of 1860, about 5 percent more voters participated on the referendum on secession.³⁶ Nevertheless, even a percentage of 75 (as it was for the presidential election) demonstrates the political involvement in the area. With the results tabulated most Waco residents had sided with the state majority and were undoubtedly pleased by the outcome. Sam Houston was decidedly unhappy. When the time came to take an oath of loyalty to the Confederacy, he refused to do so and was removed from office.³⁷ In Waco and the surrounding area, the question of what to do next and how to support the Confederacy fell to the people.

Once Texas joined the Confederate States of America and the war officially began, many residents of Waco answered the call to arms. This fact should be unsurprising given the support for secession in the county. Even some who initially opposed secession supported the Confederacy after Texas had left the Union further bolstering the number of soldiers from the region. In total, about a quarter of McLennan County's total adult male population served in the Confederate forces.³⁸ Naturally, many of the men from Waco and the surrounding area served as enlisted volunteer soldiers while some became officers. Despite the relatively small number of generals compared to the massive number of men who served in the war, McLennan County was home to no less than six confederate generals including Generals Thomas Harrison and Hiram

³⁶ Timmons, "The Referendum in Texas," 19.

³⁷ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 244.

³⁸ Kelley, *Handbook of Waco*, 59.

Granbury.³⁹ The fact that such a new and small community boasted so many general officers speaks to its dedication to the Confederate cause.

Unlike soldiers from other states, troops from Texas served in every single theater of action. This meant that the experiences of individual soldiers varied depending on which unit they joined and where that unit served. Arguably the most famous Texas soldiers were Hood's Texas Brigade which fought in the Army of Northern Virginia and saw action throughout the war from the Peninsula campaign to the war's end.⁴⁰ Still others fought in the Western theater with Texan soldiers present at every major engagement. Among these, the men of Granbury's Texas Brigade attached to Cleburne's Division acquitted themselves particularly well.⁴¹ Also in the west, a Texas cavalry unit known as Terry's Texas Rangers fought hard throughout the war.⁴² Although men from Waco ended up in units across the South, many of the men from McLennan County served in the Fifteenth Texas Infantry Regiment formed by Joseph Warren Speight in 1862 after the war had already begun.⁴³ The "loss" of so many adult white men to the frontlines of the war created massive disruption in Waco and other communities even as it indelibly shaped the men themselves. As with every war, the men who did eventually return home did so with scars both visible and invisible.

Of course, not everyone in Waco left to fight in the war. As with most conflicts, the war drew away young adult to middle-aged men, but it left older white men and young boys, women,

³⁹ Kelley, *Handbook of Waco*, 59; Bradly and Kent, "Granbury, Hiram Bronson (1831–1864)," *Handbook of Texas*.

⁴⁰ Harold B. Simpson, *Gaines Mill to Appomattox: Waco and McLennan County in Hood's Texas Brigade* (Waco: Texian Press, 1963).

⁴¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 678.

⁴² Thomas W. Cutrer, Eighth Texas Cavalry [Terry's Texas Rangers], *Handbook of Texas*.

⁴³ Hamaker, *Making a Good Soldier*, 11.

and, in the case of the American Civil War, African Americans of all ages. All these people also felt the effects of the war, but in a different way than the men who had gone to fight.

The first major group of people who remained in Waco were white males who did not enroll in the Confederate military of whom most were older men or young boys. The older men had to work to maintain order in the region. Not only did they have to keep the town running, but they also had to step back into some roles to which they likely had not been performing such as overseeing enslaved laborers. The white population tended to be more paranoid about the possibility of slave revolts because of the vacuum of young white men in their communities. In Waco, residents both White and Black also feared raids by Comanches and other Native American groups. While some younger men had formed frontier guards to defend against these attacks, older men who could not stand the rigors of distant campaigns also joined these local units.⁴⁴

As older men stepped back into roles from which they had previously “retired,” young boys had to begin assuming duties earlier than they otherwise would have. In the rural parts of McLennan County, boys began performing tasks that their fathers and brothers had completed before the outset of war. Many older boys also took responsibility for the safety of their mothers and sisters. For example, before the war the father of a small farm would defend his family from any kind of attack. In the absence of the head of house, this duty often fell to the oldest son left at home. Many of these boys also felt anxious to join the military themselves. As with many wars, some lied about their age to enlist as teenagers. While the remaining white males both young and old felt the absence of all the men who had left, women and African Americans faced even more uncertainty than the white men who remained.

⁴⁴ Hamaker, *Making a Good Soldier*, 9; Kelley, *Handbook of Waco*, 59.

As white men went to war, white women were left at home. These wives, mothers, and daughters wrestled with the changes created by the absence of so many men and faced dangers that they had not had to face alone. Many women stepped into roles and took on tasks that they had not previously carried out.⁴⁵ Rural women who lived on small farms, now had to keep up with their many normal tasks while also seeing to the crops and animals and potentially protecting their farm from dangers. For upper class women, their lives did not inherently mean more manual labor, but it often meant more direct oversight of large estates and plantations.⁴⁶ During the antebellum era, it was common for women to run the great house of an estate while their husbands oversaw the estate including both crop production and finances. During the war, both sets of duties often fell to wealthy wives.

The absence of so many men also increased dangers for the women who remained at home. Throughout the South, the threat of hostile men attacking while the husband was away at war was a primary fear of those left at home. Exactly which group this might be varied from region to region. In areas of Union movement or occupation, Southerners feared the action of Northern soldiers. This fear did not materialize particularly often as Union officers usually restrained their men from directly targeting southern civilians.⁴⁷ An even greater threat than Union soldiers were deserters from both armies.⁴⁸ These men posed a danger, because they were often desperate and operated outside of any military or civil authority. As General William T.

⁴⁵ Jessica Ziparo, *This Grand Experiment: When Women Entered the Federal Workforce in Civil War-Era Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlet Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 76.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Scarlet Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, 77.

⁴⁷ Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Towards Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 222-223.

⁴⁸ Noah Andre Trudeau, *Southern Storm: Sherman's March to the Sea* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 265-266.

Sherman led his armies through the South, it was primarily deserters who committed atrocities as they followed behind the army. In areas far removed from Union troops, dangers still concerned those left at home.

In central Texas, people feared raids by groups of Native Americans. These raids were not new, but with fewer white men in the region to respond to attacks, the threat increased. Texas raised military units to protect the frontier populations, but they could not be everywhere at once. On isolated farmsteads, women and young boys had to remain vigilant against attacks. Possibly the greatest fear among white southerners was rebellion from enslaved African Americans. With fewer white men present throughout southern communities, many feared that African Americans would take the opportunity to violently rebel. While this fear did not commonly materialize, it motivated the actions of many Southerners during the years of conflict.

White women responded to these dangers in several ways. Many adapted to their new situation by taking on more work and the responsibility of defending themselves and their children. Although more common for northern women who did not face as many dangers at home, some also responded by serving as nurses or in other capacities to help the war effort. Still others migrated from their homes to safer regions. The war created many refugees from occupied areas. At least some of those women moved from other areas of the South to Texas. Susan A. Williams fled from occupied Louisiana to Texas where she joined First Presbyterian in Waco.⁴⁹ This migration of women who had the means to flee in the face of Union soldiers left many plantations in Louisiana and other parts of the south unmaintained. In addition to the other responses, a few women both North and South responded by disguising themselves as men to

⁴⁹ First Presbyterian Church Waco, *First Presbyterian Minute Book A*. Collection of Church Records, First Presbyterian Church Archive, Waco TX, 5.

fight in the Civil War. Many of these women served bravely and were not discovered until they were killed or injured in battle.⁵⁰ Although few women responded in this way, the numbers while small are not insignificant.⁵¹

African Americans faced particularly diverse and difficult conditions during the Civil War. The exact conditions that African Americans found themselves in varied from region to region within the South. Despite these differences, almost all African Americans faced a heightened fear amongst many white Southerners.⁵² This fear drove them to monitor African Americans more closely and attempt to exert greater control over the African American community. Black southerners had to face these tightening restrictions across the South. In some cases, it simply meant a curtailing of what limited autonomy and freedoms African Americans had in the late ante-bellum era, but in other cases, the fear drove white southerners to physically harm or even kill African Americans especially in areas with higher concentrations of African Americans.⁵³ In this environment, many black southerners tried to avoid drawing attention to themselves or, if possible, escape to safety elsewhere. Texas did not offer the latter option.

The Civil War brought great change to the lives of Blacks, but not uniformly nor consistently. African Americans who lived in slave states that stayed in the Union remained enslaved until the end of the war and ratification of the 13th amendment to the Constitution. The day to day lives of these men and women did not radically alter until after the war was over. Likewise, the lives of Black people in areas of rebellion which did not see Union occupation or

⁵⁰ DeAnne Blanton and Laruen M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 107.

⁵¹ Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 7.

⁵² Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 260.

⁵³ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 260.

the marching of Union armies, also did not significantly change except for the aforementioned tightening restrictions and fear of violence from white southerners. Even with the Emancipation Proclamation, the end of slavery could only be enforced in places that the Union had gained control. This left many areas in which slavery continued through the Civil War. Although the war initiated change for these people, many effects were not manifested until the war was over.

The African Americans who felt the most immediate change were those who lived in or near to areas occupied by Union forces. Black southerners who were formerly enslaved were freed by Union forces in areas which they controlled after the Emancipation Proclamation.⁵⁴ In these regions, the process of reconstruction began as early as 1863.⁵⁵ Formerly enslaved African Americans began to exercise their newfound freedom in many ways including by taking work for the Union officials who occupied their States. In areas near Union forces (but not directly occupied by the Union), enslaved workers had a choice. They could remain on their plantations, or they could attempt to escape to Union held territory. While escape would mean freedom, the attempt also contained tremendous risk. If Southern whites caught people attempting to escape, the punishment could be severe.⁵⁶ Moreover, even if formerly enslaved African Americans made it to Union forces, there was no guarantee that the Union army would help them. This lack of assistance could be due to several different factors at different points in the war, but a simple reality was that sometimes the Union Army had to withhold support out of military necessity.⁵⁷ Even sympathetic generals (which not all generals were especially in the early years of the war) had to weigh helping escaped African Americans with the logistical needs of their armies.

⁵⁴ Emancipation Proclamation.

⁵⁵ Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 2.

⁵⁶ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 654-655.

⁵⁷ Steven E. Woodworth, *This Great Struggle: America's Civil War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 319-320.

Ultimately, they were first and foremost tasked with winning the war. In short, even making it to the Union did not guarantee safety. Despite these risks, thousands of African Americans took the opportunity to escape when they heard that Union forces were near.⁵⁸

In order to prevent the escape of their enslaved laborers, some plantation owners transferred their workers from their own plantations to areas less likely to witness Union occupation.⁵⁹ This led to the forced migration of many African Americans. One particularly common place to send enslaved workers was Texas due to its remoteness and distance from the main areas of conflict. During the war, many African Americans arrived in Texas from other parts of the South. Waco was no exception to this trend.⁶⁰ This influx of enslaved Black people coupled with the absence of so many white men heightened tensions in Waco and other areas that witnessed these demographic trends.

Even as individuals in Waco responded to the coming of the Civil War, so too did First Baptist Church as a collective. Although direct references to the conflict only appear in a few instances within the minutes these entries provide a good sense of the church's collective position regarding the American Civil War. The first reference to the conflict that the minutes note states that the church "unanimously acceded to the proposition in the Proclamation of the President of the Confederate States to observe the 13th inst as a day of humiliation, fasting and prayer in acknowledgement of our dependence on God as a Nation."⁶¹ While this sentence may seem straight forward, a close reading reveals a great deal of information about the perspective of the church.

⁵⁸ Woodworth, *This Great Struggle*, 319-320.

⁵⁹ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 260.

⁶⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book B; First Baptist, Roster Book.

⁶¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 77.

Most obviously, the entry indicates that the church agreed to hold a day of fasting and pray for the Confederacy meaning that the people of the church believed in the new ‘nation.’⁶² It is crucial to observe that the minutes note that decision was unanimous.⁶³ In fact, it almost seems like the acceding was a formality. There appears to have been little to no debate about the issue. Given the location of First Baptist Waco in the heart of a stalwartly pro-secession area, this is not surprising. However, it is important to observe that a unanimous vote does not necessarily mean that every single member of the community ardently supported the Confederacy. Some members who may have had misgivings could have been absent that Saturday or voted for the day of prayer despite their lukewarm support for the cause. The reality was that voicing any concern about the Confederacy or pro-Union sentiment could endanger one’s life in Civil War era Texas.⁶⁴ Another key fact is that the decision to hold a day of prayer and fasting took place at the Saturday conference. This means that few if any African Americans were likely present to object. Even if they were there, several factors suggest that they probably would not have voted against it. African Americans would have faced even more danger than white members if they said or did anything that could be construed as Unionist (or rebellious). Moreover, despite the church constitution, they may not have been allowed to vote even if they wanted. There is also the possibility that many Black members recognized the need for prayer as keenly as white members. Of course, their prayers would likely have been quite different.⁶⁵

Beyond the church’s acceptance of the observance, specific preparation for the day is also notable. The thirteenth of the month was a Thursday, but the idea of the day of fasting and

⁶² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 77.

⁶³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 77.

⁶⁴ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 265-266.

⁶⁵ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 260.

prayer was not simply that members would refrain from eating and pray instead.⁶⁶ The church (as did many others across the South) planned a special service for that day. It engaged prominent member Elder Noah Crain (who soon left to serve in the Confederate military) “to preach on that occasion.”⁶⁷ Effectively, the proclamation turned that Thursday into a day of worship as going to church would significantly curtail any plans for work. Notably, the fact that the special service fell on a Thursday created another barrier between the proclamation and the African American members of the church. If any Black members wanted to attend, they would have needed to get their master’s permission as it was a weekday in the middle of summer.⁶⁸ Taken together with the notion that African Americans probably did not vote for the observance in the first place, this means that the day of fasting and prayer better reflects the will of the white portion of First Baptist Church than that of the whole church.

The observance also reflects the links between religious and political ideology held by members of First Baptist Church. Although it is unlikely that every white member of First Baptist was a radical secessionist, most members of First Baptist clearly supported the Confederacy. This naturally included supporting the cultural and societal norms of their time and place. The fact that members of First Baptist had a day of prayer and fasting for the Confederacy highlights the complex relationship between politics and religion. On the one hand, white members of First Baptist subscribed to a denomination that at least in theory offered spiritual equality to all members regardless of gender or race. In other words, all were equally in need of God’s grace and capable of receiving that grace. For most white southerners though, that is where the equality found its limits. In supporting the Confederacy members of First Baptist

⁶⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 77.

⁶⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 77.

⁶⁸ Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 54-60.

were not simply acceding to southern independence, they were supporting the cause of southern independence. Although some argue over the reasons for the American Civil War, it is clear from the words of those who argued for secession and the various state ordinances of secession that the “cornerstone” of the Confederacy, as Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens famously put it, was slavery.⁶⁹

White Baptists in Waco and across the South handled this conflict between spiritual equality and political/social inequality in a few different ways. Most simply, some made the argument that even though African Americans were equal before God, that had no bearing in their political or social status. Spiritually equality did not translate to total equality. Of course, they looked to the Bible for support and found passages that describe how slaves should respond to their masters and how masters should treat their slaves. Undoubtedly, these passages were used frequently both to reassure white Christians and pressure Black Christians to be good workers. Many white Southerners also believed that people of color were naturally inferior to white people. Some Christians even argued that people of African descent had been cursed to be enslaved by God because of their supposed ancestor Ham.⁷⁰ Despite these beliefs, most southern Christians recognized the humanity of African Americans, thus they worked to minister to enslaved workers.

The most direct way in which the war affected First Baptist Church of Waco was by drawing many of the men away from the community to fight for the Confederacy. Joseph Warren Speight was arguably the most prominent of such men. Having been part of the church

⁶⁹ Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

⁷⁰ Whitford, *The Curse of Ham*.

since the mid-1850s, he had become an integral part of the operations of the church. Most notably, he served as the church clerk during most of his years of membership.⁷¹ In this capacity, he attended every church meeting and inherently possessed great knowledge of everything going on in the church. He also worked as a deacon with the church body.⁷² This group of men aided people within the community who needed help (most prominently widows and orphans), but they were also seen as leaders within the church. Deacons often served on committees that the church body formed to investigate issues facing the church. While these groups did not make unilateral decisions, their recommendations were often followed by the church at large. Speight served on many of these committees, and likely contributed significantly to the governance of the church.⁷³

Of course, Speight's church activity (as involved as he was) was not his primary vocation. Joseph Warren Speight was a successful planter. This fact gave him both wealth and status in the community. To some degree, his status likely affected the influence he wielded within the church, but it also increased his stature in the wider Waco community.⁷⁴ He served as a high ranking member of the Masons and was instrumental in organizing the construction of the Waco Suspension Bridge in the early 1870s.⁷⁵ This status meant that at the onset of the American Civil War, Speight became an obvious candidate to lead one of the newly formed units being sent to fight for the Confederacy. To modern observers, the idea of a civilian planter with

⁷¹ First Baptist, Minute Book A and B.

⁷² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 73.

⁷³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 73.

⁷⁴ It must be noted that First Baptist was home to many powerful individuals, which alongside the egalitarian nature of the Baptists means that Speight could not have exercised as much influence as he possibly could have in other denominations or regions of the country.

⁷⁵ Kelley, Handbook of Waco, 250.

little military experience instantly becoming an officer may seem very strange, but it was common practice at the beginning of the American Civil War.⁷⁶ Because there were so few trained officers (although Waco did boast its share of veterans), most volunteer units elected their leaders based on their seniority and stature within the community under the authority of the man or men who used their finances and organizational skill to raise the unit. Joseph Warren Speight possessed all of these qualifications.

In early 1862, Speight channeled his energy into recruiting men for an infantry regiment alongside his friend and fellow First Baptist member James Harrison. The companies he raised became the core of the Fifteenth Texas Infantry and mustered in Millican north of Houston.⁷⁷ Speight became the colonel of this new regiment with Harrison his lieutenant colonel. Speight commanded the regiment until the summer of 1863, during which time the unit operated in Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana. In early 1863, Speight briefly served as the commander of the brigade to which his regiment was attached, but despite commanding the brigade, he did not receive a promotion to the rank of brigadier general.⁷⁸ Due to continued health struggles, Speight eventually resigned on April 15, 1864, and Harrison earned a promotion to colonel and permanent command of the Fifteenth Texas Infantry.⁷⁹ Harrison and his men (including many from Waco), fought on without Speight throughout 1864 into 1865, when they too finally returned home.

Joseph Warren Speight was by no means the only prominent member of First Baptist to be called away from the community by the war. As already noted, was his second in command,

⁷⁶ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 326.

⁷⁷ Hamaker, *Making a Good Soldier*, 7.

⁷⁸ Register for 15th Texas Infantry, April 15, 1864, Accessed through Fold3.

⁷⁹ Barr, *Polignac's Texas Brigade*, 41.

but even more difficult for the church, he also recruited Rufus Columbus Burleson as the regimental chaplain. First Baptist Church of Waco had just decided to call Burleson to serve as pastor of the church for 1862.⁸⁰ Burleson had moved to the community several months before and had been confirmed as an elder in the church. The primary reason for his swift advancement into leadership was his previous experience within Texas Baptist circles. Before moving to Waco to serve as the president of the newly formed Waco University and previously served as the president of Baylor College in Independence, Texas, where he was also an elder in the Baptist Church. Presidency at Baylor was also notable, because it was a Baptist institution. In short, Rufus C. Burleson was well known to most Baptists within Texas.

It may seem surprising that Burleson would give up his position at Baylor, which was already established and rested in the heart of Baptist territory in Texas, but a significant factor likely helped make the decision more palatable. In the late 1850s, Burleson became involved in a heated dispute with the head of the female department at Baylor.⁸¹ As the president of the University, Burleson directly oversaw the male department and its activities, but he believed that as president, the head of the female department was subordinate to him. Conflict arose over curriculum, but the dispute also demonstrated a deeper fault line: the head of the female department rejected the idea that he needed to report to Burleson. The dispute ultimately devolved into a series of heated letters, before Burleson resigned to take the position in Waco.⁸² He moved to Waco in 1861 and took four faculty members, including his brother, Richard B.

⁸⁰ Pastoral appointments appear to have been considered each fall for the following calendar year.

⁸¹ Lois Smith Murray, *Baylor at Independence* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1972), 178-180.

⁸² Murray, *Baylor at Independence*, 192.

Burleson, with him to help start the new university.⁸³ Given his responsibilities as the head of Waco University, it is somewhat interesting that the church chose to elect Burleson as its pastor for 1862. His duties as a university president, which included traveling to raise money for the institution, meant that he could inherently devote less time to the growing church. Several factors were likely at play in the decision to call him despite his other responsibilities.

Primarily, Burleson appears to have been a very good preacher according to the standards of the era. Several of his sermons have even been preserved and published among collections of his writings.⁸⁴ Before serving at Baylor, he had been a full-time pastor, and unlike some Baptist ministers, he could draw on knowledge gained from his seminary education. It is probably unfair to say that he was head and shoulders above any other candidates at the church, but his background and training likely made him the best choice. Secondly, the church possessed an established group of elders who provided much of the leadership for the church. Unlike the earliest days of the church in which there were only one or two elders alongside the pastor, by 1861, there were at least four or five active elders in the church.⁸⁵ This meant that the pastor was expected to preach and chair church meetings, but he did not have to bear as much responsibility for the church as the original pastor did. Thirdly, First Baptist Church of Waco was the heart of the Waco Baptist Association with which Waco University was affiliated.⁸⁶ Because of the close links between these organizations, joint leadership would be much more workable than sharing a

⁸³ Murray, *Baylor at Independence*, 192.

⁸⁴ Rufus C. Burleson and Harry Haynes. Edited by Georgia J. Burleson. *The Life And Writings Of Rufus C. Burleson* (1901).

⁸⁵ First Baptist, Roster Book.

⁸⁶ Walker, *History of the Waco Baptist Association*, 427.

leader with a completely unrelated organization. With these factors in mind, calling Burleson to pastor the church makes a great deal of sense.

Upon receiving the call from First Baptist Waco in the fall of 1861, Burleson requested time to pray and consider the proposal. He finally accepted the call in January 1862. Why such a long delay? While many factors could have been weighing on Burleson's mind, the church minutes indicate that the reason he offered to the congregation for the slowness of the response was the rapidly escalating military crisis.⁸⁷ In fact, his acceptance of the pastoral position was conditioned on his ability to resign if called to serve as a chaplain in the Confederate Army.⁸⁸ Even in a relatively remote corner of the country, the Civil War affected such seemingly unrelated issues as church governance. For several months, Burleson served as the Pastor of First Baptist Church in addition to his duties as the president of Waco College.

Burleson did not serve in his position long as he resigned to volunteer as the Fifteenth Texas Infantry's chaplain.⁸⁹ The church then had to fill the leadership role. Interestingly, it offered the job to Richard Byrd Burleson.⁹⁰ He accepted and served in the position for the remainder of 1862. It is not clear from the minutes if R. B. Burleson was meant to fully replace his brother or simply serve as interim in his absence.⁹¹ Despite his commission in the army, it appears that Rufus C. Burleson remained in or near Waco for much of the rest of the year as well. The church minutes continue to list him as moderator for several meetings after his resignation. Rufus C. Burleson seems to have stayed in central Texas until sometime in 1863.

⁸⁷ First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 91.

⁸⁸ First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 91.

⁸⁹ Blake R. Hamaker, "Making a Good Soldier: A Historical and Quantitative Study of the 15th Texas Infantry, C.S.A." (Master's Thesis, University of North Texas, 1998), 10.

⁹⁰ First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 97.

⁹¹ First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 97.

Why did he stay so long after his commission? The 15th Texas spent most of 1862 drilling in Texas.⁹² As a chaplain, it is possible that Burlison was not required to participate in training; therefore, he was able to remain in or at least often visit Waco until his regiment departed Texas in 1863 to confront Union forces in the Trans-Mississippi Theater.⁹³

Military records indicate that when his regiment eventually marched to Arkansas and then Louisiana, Burlison went with them as was his duty as chaplain. Muster records do reveal, though, that he often took leave even after the unit was far removed from central Texas.⁹⁴ This meant that although he was still technically the unit's chaplain, he was not present during much of the 1863 campaign. From a modern perspective, taking leave in the middle of a war seems unusual or irregular, but it was relatively common during the American Civil War and in preceding conflicts. In pre-modern and early modern warfare, active campaigning did not regularly occur during the winter, and during that season, armies would often shrink or even dissolve. Although this was changing during the mid-nineteenth century, many Civil War soldiers sought and received leave during the conflict. Even Col. Speight took leave due to his poor health.

In most cases, of course, leave was only temporary, but for Rufus C. Burlison, it served as a precursor to his resignation. Although he clearly took his duties as a chaplain seriously, it appears that he was being pulled in multiple directions. In addition to pressure to return to Waco and First Baptist Church, he also maintained his presidency at Waco College. This web of

⁹² Hamaker, "Making a Good Soldier," 18.

⁹³ Hamaker, "Making a Good Soldier," 25-26.

⁹⁴ R. C. Burlison Muster Card, 19 June 1863, Group 109, Roll 0376, "Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Texas," National Archives, National Archives and Records Administration.

conflicting responsibilities and loyalties ultimately led to his resignation from the Confederate Army. The official discharge is dated June 1863.⁹⁵ Interestingly, despite the pressure for him to return, he did not resume the pastorate of the church until 1865. While it is unclear why this occurred, it appears that his role as president of the college ultimately drew most of his attention in 1864. Burlison's absence from the pulpit was only one of many difficulties that First Baptist Church faced during the years of the Civil War. These challenges must be examined in further detail beginning with the issue of authority.

⁹⁵ R. C. Burlison Muster Card, 19 June 1863, Group 109, Roll 0376, "Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Texas," National Archives, National Archives and Records Administration.

Chapter Five

“Recently Disturbed in their Worship” Authority, Leadership, and Conflict during the War Years

Perhaps the most glaring challenge First Baptist Faced during the Civil War was the issue of leadership and authority in the church. As with membership and discipline, the white members of the church involved themselves much more directly in the affairs the black community even while facing severe challenges in pastoral leadership. They began to tighten control of the African American members through more direct oversight. For their part, the people of color within the church had to navigate the increased scrutiny from the white members of the fellowship. As this struggle came to a head, it highlighted the inherent inequality that had always been present and the contradictions between Baptist doctrine and practice. Although people at the time could not have known it, in hindsight, the conflict of the war years within the church can be seen as the birth pangs of an independent fellowship which had been gestating within First Baptist for the previous decade. To understand these struggles, it is necessary to gauge the tremendous impact the lack of pastoral leadership had on First Baptist Church.

First Baptist Church of Waco exemplifies the struggles that many churches faced regarding pastoral leadership. The reaction of the church to the departure of their Pastor R. C. Burleson is telling. The congregation seems to have continued in his absence until the fall of 1862 when it was time to select a pastor for 1863. In a surprisingly bold move, the church sent a letter to Col. Speight requesting him to discharge Burleson so that he could return to Waco and

resume the pastorate in 1863.¹ It is not certain whether a response was sent. Nor is it known whether Burleson himself pushed for dismissal (although based on the minutes' phrasing of "accept his resignation," this is possible).² What is certain is that whether because of the letter or not, Burleson remained absent from his unit for large parts of the Spring of 1863, and it appears that eventually he resigned in June.³ Church minute entries during that year also refer to him as pastor. Despite the return of Burleson (or in the very least his efforts to manage duties as both a pastor and chaplain), the church minutes indicate that the congregation voted to offer the role of pastor to their former pastor Solomon G. O'Bryan at the end of 1863 for the year 1864.

Unfortunately for the church (although not necessarily surprising given that he had been replaced by the congregation at the end of 1859), he respectfully declined to serve.⁴ The membership then called W. H. Anderson who accepted the position. Like Burleson, Anderson had recently moved to Waco at the time of his election. Unlike Burleson, he had come from out of state. Anderson had immigrated from Mississippi and did not actually join the church with his family until after his acceptance of the pastoral position. It does appear that he had preached for the church on a number of occasions in the fall of 1863 and previously had been recognized as an elder in the Baptist denomination.⁵ The process of replacing Burleson seems to have been a struggle for the church and Anderson only served for the duration of 1864. Why the church did not call Burleson for the year 1864 is unclear, but by 1865, he resumed the pastorate.

¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 109.

² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 109.

³ R. C. Burleson Muster Card, 19 June 1863, Group 109, Roll 0376, "Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Texas," National Archives, National Archives and Records Administration.

⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 126.

⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 123.

The experience of First Baptist Church provides a concrete example of the challenge of church leadership during the Civil War. In order to understand the magnitude of the issue, one must first consider the role of pastors (and other church leaders) and the process of calling them to serve in the church. Clergy during the nineteenth century performed basically the same function in society that they serve today. They led the church, offered sermons from the pulpit, and presided over various religious ceremonies. Most importantly, they served as visible leaders for the congregation. Assisting the senior pastor in many denominations (including the Baptists of that era) were elders. These men served as leaders of the church community, and in the case of Baptists, often helmed committees. Elders sometimes led church meetings in the absence of the senior pastor. Like all organizations, leadership in the church is critical; therefore, selecting the right pastor and elders is an extremely important decision.

Today, most Protestant churches (except for those assigned ministers by a centralized organization) perform a job search when the need to find a new pastor arises. While much variation existed, it appears that many churches of the 1800s (particularly those that were on the edge of white settlement) often called a pastor from within the church congregation.⁶ This certainly was the case with First Baptist Church of Waco. Contemporary records indicate that the church voted each October or November to determine who would serve as pastor the following year.⁷ This does not mean that a different person served as pastor every year, but it does mean that the church voted to return an incumbent to the position.

As it did so many other aspects of society, the advent of the Civil War disrupted the basic structure of church leadership by separating pastors from their flocks. The many pastors who left

⁶ First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 84.

⁷ First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 84.

home to serve in the army are the most obvious example of this rupture. Both Union and Confederate armies needed chaplains to serve the soldiers, and obvious candidates were already ordained ministers. Chaplains were usually attached to regiments, but not every unit had a chaplain.⁸ Although many pastors enlisted, there were not enough to serve every regiment. In some sense, the war doubled the need for pastors. Every clergyman who answered the call left a vacuum in his home congregation.

In addition to serving as pastors, some clergy served as regular soldiers or officers. Foregoing their religious duties, they took up arms to defend the cause alongside their parishioners.⁹ These men sometimes counseled other soldiers or led prayer, but they were obviously not exempt for normal duties commensurate with their rank and assignment. Leonidas Polk, an Episcopal Bishop from Louisiana, became one of the most famous such clergymen when he accepted a commission as a Confederate general.¹⁰ Because men like Polk were not leaving their churches to provide pastoral care to soldiers but to fight alongside them, they compounded the crisis of ministerial care during the Civil War.

The war affected pastoral searches beyond simply drawing men away to distant battlefields. The confusion and lack of certainty present in a wartime environment affected those who remained at home. Conflict creates additional variables when weighing any decision, and it directly affected the considerations of some men who were called to the pastorates. An excellent example is the calling of Rufus C. Burleson to pastor First Baptist Church of Waco. It took him several months to accept the call, because of uncertainty about the war and his role in the

⁸ Woodworth, *While God is Marching On*, 148.

⁹ Woodworth, *While God is Marching On*, 147.

¹⁰ Woodworth, *While God is Marching On*, 147.

conflict. Although the war eventually pulled him away to serve in the Confederate army, it affected the church long before he actually left.

Because churches could not maintain themselves without leadership, congregations attempted to deal with the loss of pastors in various ways; the churches in Waco exemplify these activities. One of the most basic options to address any vacancy is to fill the opening with an alternate candidate. First Baptist Church pursued this route when they called R. B. Burleson to replace his brother.¹¹ The minutes do not provide a detailed record of why they chose the previous pastor's brother, but it was a notable decision. R. B. Burleson was also an elder in the church and seems to have held the respect of the congregation. It is unclear whether they were trying to maintain the status quo or had selected him for his own merits. He was clearly not the primary candidate, because they attempted to select Rufus Burleson again in late 1863 for the following year. It is also intriguing that they did not call R. B. Burleson back to the pulpit for 1864 when it was clear that R. C. Burleson could not serve. They eventually looked to leadership from outside the congregation.

It seems clear that the First Baptist Church of Waco churches preferred to select leaders from within the congregation (or at least from within the established Baptist community in Texas), but when this proved difficult, the members called a man to leadership who was very new to the community. The fact that First Baptist only called W. H. Anderson after other men proved unavailable or unwilling demonstrates that the war impacted even the relatively remote environs of Texas. Anderson was not the community's first choice, and he only served as pastor for one year. When the war ended, R. C. Burleson was restored to the pulpit. While not as destructive as marching armies, the confusion in the pastoral search of First Baptist shows that

¹¹ First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 97.

war disrupts society in much more subtle ways than the clashing of soldiers. Interestingly, First Baptist's sister evangelical church First Presbyterian of Waco also called a leader from outside its own community during the Civil War. That congregation had originally formed at the very end of the 1850s but remained small into the first years of conflict. When the congregation found that it had no more elders (why the founding elders left the community is unknown) it accepted a man into the congregation and then immediately elevated him to an elder in the church.¹² At the time of his ordination, he was the only active elder in the congregation.¹³ He was however joined by S. A. King who served as the pastor of the church for many years following 1863. The calling of these men served as almost a re-founding of the church.

A willingness to address public authorities is another response that can be seen in the case of First Baptist. The boldness to write a colonel in the Confederate Army asking him to discharge a chaplain is remarkable. That Col. Speight was a well-respected member and lay leader within First Baptist undoubtedly bolstered their courage, but even within this context, the action is still surprising. Although this tactic failed, it demonstrates that the members of First Baptist (or at least the leaders) had confidence to make requests of civil authorities and shows how much the war disrupted the inner workings of the church. That the congregation penned a letter is proof of how much they wanted their own pastor to return from the war. While some congregations may have despaired, this group maintained hope that they could affect their pastor's reappointment. They only selected a replacement after they had failed to recall the man they truly wanted. In the case of Waco, the Civil War created uncertainty which drove congregations to call men who otherwise would likely never have been called to minister to the

¹² Church Minutes, Collection of Church Records, First Presbyterian Church Archive, First Presbyterian Church Waco, Waco TX, 4.

¹³ First Presbyterian, Minute Book A, 4.

congregation. This seems to have worked out to the benefit of First Presbyterian, but for First Baptist, the chaos appears to have been much more negative.

Simultaneous with the struggle of pastoral leadership, conflict also increased between the white and black members of the church. By the end of the 1850s, the African American members of the church had placed themselves on a path toward ever greater amounts of autonomy and leadership. They had their own service, largely managed their own membership, and had called deacons to serve the community. By 1861, they had even pushed the white portion of the membership to approve African American preachers and had called Stephen to preach for the year. All these advancements came into question as the war began. The core of this struggle rested in the issue of authority in the church. Before the war, African Americans had assumed more and more authority over their own activities with relatively little resistance from the white members. What changed in the war years was an attempt by the white members to reassert their authority over the African American community.

White efforts in First Baptist Church to reassert authority over the black members likely derived from white fear of the loss of slavery and the general violence sweeping the South in months preceding the election of 1860. From the bloodshed in Kansas to John Brown's failed raid on Harper's Ferry, white southerners saw many points of concern as they looked around the country. Texas was far removed from the main areas of concern, but that does not mean that white Texans did not share in the fears of other southerners or that violence did not slip into the state. East Texas and North Texas in particular experienced a wave of violence in 1860 which included arsons and other violent crimes. Pro-secession Texans blamed many of these incidents on enslaved people of color and white unionists and sometimes responded through violent

retribution.¹⁴ Waco experienced relatively few such incidents, but the close proximity of other parts of Texas undoubtedly made people of McLennan Country nervous.

The fear present in 1860 was multifaceted. Many white southerners believed that the violence and ultimate coming of civil war would inspire African Americans to rise up in rebellion.¹⁵ This concern became even more pronounced in 1861 as large portions of the white male population went off to fight for the Confederacy leaving only old men, young boys, and women at home with the large enslaved population.¹⁶ Although large scale rebellion against slavery did not materialize in the form of violent conflict, the possibility of it inspired much of the white South's beliefs and attitudes as it had for generations, but in an even more pronounced way. During the war years, white southerners took steps to ensure their continued authority on the home front even as they were fighting to secure their system on the battlefields.

Of course, fear was not only present among the white population. African Americans had many concerns as well. Chief among these was the fear that they would be blamed for crimes that they did not commit. This reality brought with it the specter of not only legal actions, but the even more terrifying possibility of extralegal recriminations. People of color have faced this fear throughout American history, but during the period just before and during the American Civil War the danger was even more pronounced. Beyond the very real threat of violence, African Americans also faced the more mundane (but constantly oppressive) increase in white scrutiny.¹⁷ Obviously, for enslaved people much depended on local circumstances, but across the south, heightened white concern meant less autonomy for African Americans. This weight of

¹⁴ Simpson, *Gaines Mill to Appomattox*, 24-25.

¹⁵ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll*, 596.

¹⁶ Alwyn Barr. *Black Texans: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1995* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 36.

¹⁷ Alwyn Barr. *Black Texans*, 36.

every present observation and oversight was undoubtedly more subtly damaging to the enslaved population, but no less real than the more obvious threat of physical violence.

The response of people within First Baptist church demonstrates the broader trends of the region. Whereas before the war African Americans seemingly attained some level of autonomy, that equilibrium came to an end in July 1861. That month, the regular Saturday conference of the church elected a permanent committee to “attend and superintend” the African American service.¹⁸ This was a major change for the black members of the church. Although white members probably attended the African American service before 1861, there was no requirement that any do so.¹⁹ This means that theoretically, only a handful of white members were present at the service throughout the 1850s and even when they attended, they may have only implicitly affected the proceedings. One of the members was often the pastor or elder who preached the sermon and chaired the conference which followed the service, but by 1861 even this had changed with Stephen regularly filling the pulpit.²⁰

The creation of a regular committee changed this by ensuring that there would always be at least six white members present at the Sunday evening service.²¹ By July of the following year, the number of people on the committee increased (although some members who were part of the committee left to serve in the war meaning the actual number of white members required to be present did not necessarily change).²² At its formation, the committee included notable members such as Joseph Speight and B. D. Arnold.²³ In addition to the stature of some of the

¹⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 79.

¹⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 26.

²⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 68.

²¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 79.

²² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 101.

²³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 79.

members, it is also important to note that this was one of the largest committees ever formed by the church. Clearly, the white members of the church wanted several men present at every African American service, and they did not want it to be haphazard as it had been in the past. This signals a significant change in the perspective of the white members of the church regarding members of color.

The creation of the committee went beyond simply ensuring white men would be present at the African American service though, because the regular conference also charged the committee “superintend the meetings of the colored brethren on sabbath evenings.”²⁴ This placed the authority of the regular conference behind them as they dealt with any business that came up during the African American service. The wording of the charge meant that not only did they have the authority of the church to act, but they in fact were mandated to do so. Even if one or more of the white members wanted to remain quiet, the wording of the resolution would have made it difficult for them. The second half of the committee’s charge meant that not only would white members be present (implicitly influencing) the Sunday evening meeting and conference, but they would also be active participants. Because of the power dynamics present in the church and the South more broadly, their participation would likely directly translate to assumption of leadership and direction despite (or maybe because of) the trends that had been set in motion in the previous decade.

The increased oversight of the African American service by white members of the church changed the dynamic in the relationship between the two communities. In one very basic sense, white presence inherently meant increased white awareness of the black community as the committee reported back to the regular church conference. It is very likely that many white

²⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 79.

members who had little direct interaction with the Sunday evening service were much more aware of all the proceedings than they had been before the changes of 1861. Of course, given the widespread concern over potential violence, it is likely that many white members appreciated the increase in information. Some white members may have simply been more comfortable with the new arrangement given the climate of Texas. Regardless of the level of interest among the white members, the records make it clear that the black community was observed more closely than they had been in the previous decade. From July 1861, the minutes record every Sunday evening service even if no major business was conducted.²⁵

The increased white presence in the Sunday evening proceedings also means that the decisions made by that conference cannot be assumed to be the pure will of the African American community. It is impossible to know for certain how vocal the white oversight committee was during the African American conference, but it is safe to assume that they offered opinions on motions and voted on any matters that required a poll including fellowship and discipline, which will be addressed in the next chapter. While it is likely that a few white members had always been a part of the Sunday evening conference, the increased presence undoubtedly influenced proceedings. This change in the relationship likely caused increased friction between the two halves of First Baptist Church.

From the African American perspective, increased white oversight must have been a harsh blow. Sadly, few records remain that record their own words. Nevertheless, the change in the relationship that occurred in 1861 must have felt like a huge step backward to the people of color in the church. Although undoubtedly upset, there was little they could do about the white decisions given the sociocultural context in which they lived. The constitution granted equal

²⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 79.

authority to all members in theory, but white members controlled the church through the Saturday conference.²⁶ They also could not simply leave if they wanted to maintain their standing as Baptists.²⁷ Even if they got letters of dismissal, there was not really a different church to join, as First Baptist was the only Baptist church in Waco at the time. Despite this reality, African Americans in First Baptist did not give up. As will be seen, they increased in number through new members, and they continued to push for more deacons and authority despite the presence of more white members. They may have been held in an inferior position, but they used the means at their disposal to keep moving forward.

White members were likely not cognizant of the increased pressure on the African American community. Certainly, they knew the actions that they were taking, but most probably they would not have seen this as an infringement on the rights of the African American community (or even as an infringement on the precedent set during the previous decade). White members generally believed that they rightfully held the authority in the church and there was nothing wrong with exercising that authority for the “good” of all members.²⁸ While it is possible that some members feared African Americans in the church, it is unlikely that this was the driving motivation behind the increased scrutiny as the service had been in existence for the better part of a decade without incident and many African Americans were longtime members in good standing. It is more likely that they found increased observation to be a prudent course of action given the political climate or that they were concerned with new African Americans joining the community. It is also strongly possible that many white members supported the

²⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 53.

²⁷ Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

²⁸ Jones, *Religious Instruction*.

changes in the Sunday evening conference as a response to significant pressure that began to build outside of the church in the wider community of Waco.

External efforts to influence the inner workings of the church can most clearly be seen in two incidents regarding the African American service with which the church had to contend. The first occurred in August 1861. In that month, “town authorities” entered First Baptist’s house of worship during the Sunday evening service and “disturbed” the worship of the African American members.²⁹ While the exact details of this incident are unclear, it is obvious that the town authorities entered the sanctuary intending to shut down or in the very least monitor the service. Either way, this action made the worshippers uncomfortable.³⁰ It is important to note that this event occurred shortly after the white members of the church had formed their committee to oversee the service; therefore, several white members also should have been present to witness the events. Whether or not they did anything to address the issue in the moment, they certainly reported back to the regular church meeting the following Saturday.³¹

This disturbance exemplifies the concern of at least some members of the outside community about the African American service. Because much city government action is based on the comments and complaints of local citizens, it is likely that individuals from the local community reported the service to the town council. Bearing in mind that many on the board would not have had a direct relationship with the church and the broader context of the era, it is likely that they believed the African American service (especially with African American preaching) to be a threat to the social order. They therefore sent agents to the service. The

²⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 80.

³⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 80.

³¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 80.

presence of these agents alone would have been enough to make members of the church uncomfortable, but given the language in the minutes, it appears that they went beyond simple observations.³² After the incident, they reported back to the city council which led to a second incident regarding the African American service.

Within a week or two after the disruption, the town council penned a letter to First Baptist Church “requesting” that they suspend the services for the African American members.³³ Clearly, whatever the representatives for the council had seen during their visit to the service had not allayed concerns. This action is important for a couple of reasons. First, although it was phrased as a request, such “requests” from authorities always bear more weight than requests from non-governmental entities. Second, this request represents a direct governmental interference in religious services. Of course, the town council would have seen a clear need for this action, but civil involvement in religious affairs is something that would have concerned many Texans (and indeed many Americans, North or South). The crux of the matter is simple: which concerns are the highest? For the town council, concern over instability in time of war outweighed reticence to use civil authority to influence religion. This left the members of First Baptist Church in a difficult position as they had to weigh the options presented to them by the events of that August.

In response to the disturbance in the African American service, the conference formed a committee to investigate the situation.³⁴ This is not surprising given the standard operating procedures of Baptist churches. It is also not surprising that the committee included three

³² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 80.

³³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 81.

³⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 80.

notable members of the white community including Joseph W. Speight who had not yet left for the war.³⁵ The conference charged the committee with three main tasks. First, they were to ascertain exactly what happened at the meeting.³⁶ This would have been done through questioning people who had been at the service. Interestingly, Speight was a member of the newly appointed white oversight committee, so either he was not present the night of the disturbance or he served as both a witness and a member of the investigation. After establishing the facts, the committee's second goal was to determine "whether and if so in what particulars the rights of this church have been infringed in the premise."³⁷ As the African American service was still part of First Baptist Church, a disruption to that meeting could qualify as an infringement on the rights of the church as a whole. In the eyes of the white members, it was a religious rights issue which needed to be addressed.

The third charge to the committee may have been the most complicated. The conference asked them to find out "what law governs this church on the subject of negro meetings."³⁸ On the surface, it seems surprising that the church did not already know the answer to this inquiry as the African American service had been in existence for a number of years. That being said, organizations sometimes make decisions without verifying legal standing even in the modern world. If no challenge arises, legally dubious processes can persist in spite of legal codes. The process would have been complicated for the committee, because the laws governing slavery in Texas had developed over several decades and under three national governments (the Republic

³⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 80.

³⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 80.

³⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 80.

³⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 80.

of Texas, The United States, and most recently the Confederate States of American).³⁹ Despite this complexity, it appears that there were no laws directly governing slave religion per se. However, any rules about slave meetings could be applied to religious services.

Given the findings and the already evident will of First Baptist to address civil authorities, the response to the ‘request’ to suspend the African American service is not surprising, but it is worth closer examination. The most basic fact is that the church refused to follow the direction of the town council.⁴⁰ This demonstrates that the members of the church believed that they held certain authority that the civil government could not override. With that in mind, it is also important to note that the minutes stipulated that “no satisfactory reason” was offered by the town council.⁴¹ This indicates that if a satisfactory reason had been provided, they might have responded differently. It is unlikely that the town council offered no justification whatsoever, so it is probable that they simply made points which the church found to be unfounded or unreasonable. Ultimately, the regular conference rejected the idea of suspension and the African American service continued. The whole episode says much about the complicated relationship between the two communities in First Baptist Waco.

While the white members of First Baptist Church of Waco often claimed to take action “for the benefit of the colored population,” the summer of 1861 demonstrated how important it was for them to maintain their religious authority both within the church and in relation to the outside community.⁴² In dealing with the disturbance to the African American service, the

³⁹ Randolph B. Campbell, ed. *The Laws of Slavery in Texas* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2010), 3-5.

⁴⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 81.

⁴¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 81.

⁴² First Baptist, Minute Book A, 26.

conference indicated that this was its chief concern in its charge to the investigation committee. The white members wanted to protect the rights of the church (over which they had been working to reaffirm their authority). Addressing the disturbance and even rejecting the ‘request’ of the town council was not primarily out of a concern for the African Americans who could have been harmed (physically or otherwise) by the intrusion that August evening. A surface understanding of the facts could lead a modern reader to presume that the white members were primarily working to protect their black coreligionists, but this idea is simply not supported by the extant records. Even if it were true, it still would have been very paternalistic.

If the core motive was not the good of the African American community, the question remains how the white members really felt about the people of color in their church. Certainly, some could have said that they did not care about the African American membership and that the goal in addressing the town council was to protect religious freedom, but in the context of the church this is unlikely. It is far more probable given the history of the church and the doctrines on which it was established that most of the white members would have stressed the importance of helping and protecting black members who could not help themselves. This kind of paternalistic attitude was common throughout the South especially in white religious communities.⁴³ Whatever the motive, the decision to challenge the will of the town council achieved both the core purpose of defending the church’s religious rights and the likely stated goal of helping the African American community. It is also true that while these motives may not have been sincerely directed for the good of the African American community, the continuation of the separate service ultimately benefited members of color within the church and helped prepare them for their own independence.

⁴³ Jones, *Religious Instruction*.

The black members were the people most directly affected by the incident in 1861, but their voice is absent from the minutes. The disturbance and its aftermath are entirely presented from the perspective of the white members of the church and the regular church conference. Despite this, context can provide some insight into black members' perspectives of the situation. During the incident, it is likely that the members of the church endured terrible fear. Given the context of the era and the number of government agents who intruded, black members could have been justly concerned that their leaders could have been arrested or worse. In the aftermath, African American members undoubtedly voiced these concerns to white members of the church. This assertion is supported by the fact that the black community had pushed white members on several previous issues including the election of deacons and preachers.⁴⁴ It is also possible that representatives from the African American service attended the sessions of the regular church conference in which the incident came to the floor. Unfortunately, there is no way to know this for sure.

In terms of the outcome, black members were probably pleased that the Sunday evening service was not suspended. Even with the increased white presence and oversight, it was still the aspect of their lives in which they as a group held the most authority. They had already used their evening conference to gain autonomy and authority beyond the original intention of the meeting, and they would have wanted to hold onto as much of these gains as possible. The continuation of the Sunday evening service also meant that they could continue to sit under the preaching of Stephen who they greatly respected and had called to regularly preach for the duration of the

⁴⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A; First Baptist, Minute Book B.

year. If the African American service ended, then the black members would have had to sit under whoever preached during the Sunday morning service.

Unfortunately for the African American members and the church as a whole, conflict over authority and pressure from the outside community did not subside after the church rejected calls for the suspension of the African American service as controversy soon embroiled Stephen Cobb. Two months after the disruption of the Sunday evening service, rumors circulated that Stephen had displayed unchristian character.⁴⁵ In the absence of further context, these rumors could have meant that he was being accused a myriad of other activities the church believed to be immoral.⁴⁶ Ultimately, the rumors got so loud that the church conference felt the need to address the situation.⁴⁷ The exact process of this disciplinary investigation will be examined in the next chapter, but a broad view of the rumors and the aftermath bears directly on the issue of authority in the church.

It seems clear that the rumors originated from outside of the church. This is because most cases of church discipline arise from a direct charge being leveled against a member during a church conference, but in Stephen's case, there was no direct charge mentioned in the minutes.⁴⁸ As it is very unlikely that members of the church would perpetuate rumors of serious unchristian character without bringing a charge against the accused party, it is probable that the rumors started outside of the church community. In the context of the previous confrontation between the church and the city council, it seems that members of the wider community launched the rumors in a further effort to disrupt the African American service. Stephen was a

⁴⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 86.

⁴⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 102 & 117.

⁴⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 86.

⁴⁸ Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

visible symbol of this community. Even more so, the fact that he was a black preacher may have made him a serious threat in the minds of some white members of the community. When direct action failed to end the African American service, Stephen was a perfect target for further disruption. Of course, members of the wider community had no direct way to challenge Stephen's role as a preacher, but the Baptist seriousness about church discipline gave them an obvious means of influence in the inner workings of the church from the outside.

After an investigation that will be discussed in more detail later, the church authorities acquitted Stephen, but asked him not to preach for a period of three months to "prevent any injury to the cause of Christ."⁴⁹ This was obviously a blow to the black members of the church as it meant that he could not serve out the rest of the year. It could have been worse, had he been convicted of the charge, but even this lesser judgment caused further disruption to the African American service and most likely a return to white preaching. Ultimately, it can be said that whoever started the rumors succeeded in causing further conflict within the church and limiting the autonomy and authority of the Sunday evening service. The episode undoubtedly increased tension between the two halves of the church. Moreover, it resulted in further slowing the progress that African Americans had made in the church. For Stephen himself, the whole incident was a stressful blow. Charges of the nature he faced can cause serious psychological and physiological damage.⁵⁰ Even after being acquitted, he was still asked to refrain from doing what he felt called to do. Even though the minutes record that he was "cheerfully assenting" to this outcome, it certainly would not have been his first preference.⁵¹ The good news for Stephen

⁴⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 88.

⁵⁰ Hila Avieli, "False Allegations of Domestic Violence: A Qualitative Analysis of Ex-Partners' Narratives" (*Journal of Family Violence*, 2021).

⁵¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 88.

and his fellow black members, is that it was only a period of three months. After that, with the rumors subsided, he could return to the pulpit.

The incident with Stephen further exemplifies the core goals of at least a majority of white members in the church. The fact that they asked Stephen not to preach even though he had been acquitted shows that they were chiefly concerned with what was good for the church as a whole and not necessarily what was good specifically for the African Americans in the church. Asking Stephen not to preach was the easiest way to let the rumors die down without possible further conflict. They clearly trusted Stephen, or they would not have approved him to preach, but this trust was not enough to prompt them to support him in the face of the rumors after his acquittal. It certainly appears that the white leaders of the church chose avoiding conflict with people outside the church rather than supporting black members within their midst. It is important to note that they did not give in to pressure to the extent that they removed him from preaching permanently. This is undoubtedly what some people in the outside community wanted. The white members of the church appear to have attempted to walk a fine line between the desires of the African American members and the outside pressure coming against the church.

In spite of this compromise and lack of full support for the black members of the church, it is likely that many of the white members would have claimed that everything they did was for the good of the church as a whole including members of color. The argument is simple; if they had not made some concessions to the outside community, it is possible that the conflict with the town council might have reignited and even intensified. Preventing this from happening may have been seen as essential in the effort to preserve the African American service. In this sense, it does appear that the compromise did work as there is no further hint in later entries in the

minutes that controversy continued beyond the late summer and fall of 1861. Nevertheless, it was a pragmatic action that compromised Baptist ideals, particularly independence and egalitarianism. Of course, it was not the first or last time that those ideals were compromised in the context of the Antebellum and Civil War South generally or within First Baptist Church of Waco specifically. For that matter, organizations in every era are susceptible to compromising their ideals in the name of pragmatism. The case of Stephen is a chief example of this fact but does not make First Baptist unique. On the contrary, if First Baptist had supported Stephen as he remained in the pulpit for the African American service, that would have been extraordinary given the context of the period and the local community.

Stephen himself was undoubtedly saddened and frustrated at the outcome of the episode. He felt called to preach and had been elected by the members to fill the pulpit for the entire year. It is hard to know what to make of the comments in the minutes that he “cheerfully assent[ed]” to the decision to cease preaching for three months.⁵² It could be an extreme exaggeration, but it is also possible that Stephen himself realized the pragmatic benefit to the action. Obviously, if all was good, Stephen would have wanted to preach, but he was a very smart man who recognized the context swirling around the situation. If his continued preaching put a target on his back or more importantly endangered the continuation of the African American service, all accounts indicate that he was the kind of man who would sacrifice his own desires for the good of the community.⁵³ It is also possible that many of the African Americans in the church also recognized the realities of the situation and encouraged him to step back for a time. Certainly, using the word “cheerful” may be an exaggeration of the emotions involved in the decision for

⁵² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 88.

⁵³ “New Hope Church History” *New Hope Baptist Church Collection* (Waco: Texas Collection at Baylor University.)

Stephen to refrain from preaching, but to assume that he and other black members did not willingly assent to the situation underestimates their intelligence and ability to be pragmatic. Undoubtedly, Stephen's preaching was their preferred outcome, but like the white members of the church, they too could recognize the danger of the situation. Nevertheless, the whole episode highlights the inequality within the church and the broader context of Waco. Even though the church had become a place for African Americans to exercise more autonomy than they did in the outside world, it could not and did not fully override the conditions endemic in the era.

The struggles over leadership and authority were some of the most dramatic to occur within First Baptist Church, but they were far from the only consequences of the war to affect the inner works of the congregation. The movement of people during the war years raised new issues with membership and discipline within the church. These changes combined with the problems of leadership to drive home the inherent inequality in the ideally egalitarian Baptist church, and it is to them that the next chapter turns.

Chapter Six

“Owing to the Peculiar State of the Country” Membership and Discipline in the Shadow of Civil War

The American Civil War exerted a far greater influence on First Baptist Church of Waco (and indeed, churches all over the country) than the disruptions in leadership themselves. The war and its effects forced the congregation to wrestle with key issues that had been somewhat settled before the conflict, particularly in the areas of membership and discipline. Prior the war, the African American members had made great strides in all of these areas to the point they were operating semi autonomously while still under the authority of First Baptist Church. During the war, as white members dealt with membership and discipline issues involving other white members, they also began to take more interest in the membership process and disciplinary proceedings of the African American membership.

Late in 1862, Mr. and Mrs. William Chambers came before First Baptist Church of Waco to seek membership in the congregation. Ordinarily, such requests were routine and immediately accepted if the petitioners possessed a letter from their previous church or were professing faith for the first time. The Chambers did not meet either of these criteria. They had moved to Waco sometime before from Johnson County where they had been long-standing members of Shiloh Church. Unfortunately, they did not possess letters, because Shiloh Church had divided into multiple congregations in the early days of the Civil War. When the Chambers sought

membership in First Baptist Waco, it raised the specter of division, which prompted questions about receiving the couple.¹

From the reaction of First Baptist Church, it is obvious that the trouble within the Shiloh Church was serious. Furthermore, the reluctance of First Baptist Waco to accept these people shows that the church was very concerned about the situation. Instead of receiving the couple into the fellowship of the church immediately, the congregation voted to appoint a committee to investigate the chaos in the Shiloh Church and the Chambers' case for membership. The committee reported the following week. They stated that it was not their duty to judge Shiloh Church, but they did confirm that the former members of the church were "scattered abroad by our National trouble."² This meant that no letters could be requested from the Chambers' former congregation. The reference to "our National trouble" is also interesting as it is a clear reference to the Civil War. While the exact cause of Shiloh Church's breakdown is unknown, the committee from First Baptist clearly believed that it was related to the ongoing issues of the Civil War. It is possible that the church divided over the issues of secession, because more unionists lived in North Texas.³ Unfortunately, evidence is not available to prove this hypothesis. Despite the concerns about their previous church, the Chamberses were accepted into First Baptist Church after the committee's report primarily because of the character they had demonstrated since moving to Waco.⁴

¹ Minute Book: Sept. 1859 to Sept. 1882. Collection of Church Records, First Baptist Church Archive, First Baptist Church Waco, Waco, TX, 108.

² First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 109.

³ Walter Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 1208.

⁴ First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 110.

While the actual cause of the Shiloh Church split is unknown, the episode highlights the importance of unity in the church. As today, churches in the Civil War era functioned well only if the congregation was unified in its purpose and beliefs. The foundation of the church is based on the premise that all members are united in brotherly love. This shared membership is the catalyst for most of the church's primary functions including spiritual encouragement, combating sin, and helping the poor and needy. Major conflicts were seen to disrupt the church and its mission. Because of this danger, churches were very cautious about whom they let into their membership. While it is true that denominations had split since the Reformation, church leaders hoped to avoid conflict within particular congregations. The elders and lay people of First Baptist Waco actively sought to maintain unity in the church in order to avoid the fate of the Shiloh Church in Johnson County.

Divisions could and did occur within the church before and after the Civil War. The causes of these conflicts vary from poor administration to doctrinal disputes. Certainly, these ordinary issues could have caused some churches to divide during the Civil War, but the sectional crisis of the antebellum years and the war itself strained the American Church to the breaking point. Historian Mark A. Noll describes the conflict as a theological crisis.⁵ The issue of slavery bitterly divided American denominations in the years before the Civil War. Most Southern pastors used the Bible to defend slavery as an institution, while many Northern pastors preached against slavery as a sin. Even before the war officially broke out, whole denominations split along Northern and Southern Lines. In areas like Waco, the churches uniformly supported the South, but in border regions, the divisions within denominations could be witnessed in

⁵ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 16.

specific congregations.⁶ Moreover, even in ardently Confederate states pockets of Unionism persisted.

Why did the Civil War affect the churches so profoundly? Essentially, the Civil War was a battle of competing ideologies and both the North and the South rooted their intellectual pursuits in theology. Because of this, a conflict over slavery or secession was inherently theological/doctrinal. Many scholars suggest that the primary issues of the Civil War were political, economic, and social, but Christianity pervaded both the Union and Confederacy.⁷ By no means was everyone an active Christian, but every believer and every church had to wrestle with the major issues of the day. Hence, questions over slavery and secession divided families, churches, and ultimately denominations.

There is no evidence that First Baptist Church or other white congregations in Waco experienced major disruptions within their congregations as a result of the war, but the care that they took to investigate new arrivals to the community highlights the importance they placed on unity. In the case of the couple that arrived from the Shiloh Church, the congregation formed a committee to investigate the circumstances that led them to Waco. In many churches today, joining is as simple as responding to an altar call and professing faith. The seriousness of membership does not indicate that First Baptist Church did not want new members (indeed, over the course of the war numerous people joined the church). Instead, it simply means that the congregation wanted to accept new members on its terms in order to avoid conflict and dissension in the future.

⁶ April E. Holm, *A Kingdom Divided: Evangelicals, Loyalty, and Sectionalism in the Civil War Era* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 123.

⁷ John Keegan, *The American Civil War: A Military History* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 23. and James M. McPherson. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 246.

Much of the wrangling over slavery and secession (particularly in the border states) occurred at the denominational level. Most major denominations had some form of wider structure even if they operated as independent congregations. The Baptists, for example, often formed associations that linked various churches together for mutual support and deliberation. In the years before the Civil War, these meetings became increasingly intense, especially in Border States. Although the Baptist Associations could not mandate the actions of individual churches, they could influence the member congregations. If several churches supported one doctrine while others supported the opposing view, a showdown could occur. This would likely result in one side or the other leaving the association. These newly independent groups could then form their own organization to rival the one they had left. According to historian April Holm, several denominations divided over the issues of slavery and secession. The Presbyterians, as with other denominations, remained divided after the war, but they eventually restored some measure of amiability.⁸

Unlike churches in the border states, First Baptist Church Waco did not experience division within its own regional organization. As recorded in the *History of the Waco Baptists Association*, this organization did not face the division that occurred in other parts of the country.⁹ This record does demonstrate that the member congregations were aware of the conflict in the country. It, along with the specific case of the Chamberses, demonstrates that letters of dismission were extremely important for the transfer of members from one congregation to another.

⁸ Holm, *A Kingdom Divided*, 189.

⁹ Walker, *History of the Waco Baptist Association*.

Why was a letter so important to nineteenth-century Protestant churches? The answer goes back to the importance of church discipline. Most secular people in the modern world, and even many Christians, would be shocked at how seriously churches of the Civil War era took the issue of accountability within the congregation. Contemporary church records provide many accounts of congregants being investigated by church committees for all manner of improprieties. Church leadership (and the lay people themselves) expected proper behavior from the congregation. If the investigation was inconclusive, the person would remain within the fellowship of the congregation, but if the committee found proof of his guilt, the church usually excluded them from the fellowship.¹⁰ As previously seen, the purpose of this practice was to keep the church pure and to remove bad influences from its membership. In the case of First Baptist Church, many individuals were investigated during the war years.¹¹ Expulsion was not necessarily permanent. Repentance was a cornerstone of Christianity. If a previously disciplined member turned from their sins, they could be reintegrated into the church. This process occurred in both First Baptist and First Presbyterian.¹²

Accountability was the reason letters of dismissal were so important. Churches wanted to prevent problems before they happened by accepting only people who they believed would be part of the congregation and live according to the community's standards. A letter served as a proof of character that allowed for quick acceptance into a new community. If an applicant did not have a letter, it was a significant red flag because only people who left without telling their previous church or those who had been excommunicated should not have letters. Naturally, some

¹⁰ First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 88.

¹¹ First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 88.

¹² First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 88; Church Rolls, Collection of Church Records, First Presbyterian Church Archive, First Presbyterian Church Waco, Waco TX, 70.

new Christians would never have been part of a congregation, but in the case of these people, the local church was likely already aware of them and their conversion experience.

As seen in the example of Chambers, the Civil War presented significant challenges for maintaining accountability. These challenges also affected many other congregations throughout both the North and the South. A major challenge was an influx of people into the church, and another was that of people leaving the church. The most common reason for people leaving the church was enlistment in the military. During the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of men left home to serve in the conflict. Waco and the surrounding area witnessed hundreds of young men join the Confederate Army. In the case of many of these soldiers, they had never left their home communities and were exposed to temptations of military camps without the support of the people who had held them accountable throughout their lives. Although historian Steven Woodworth presents strong evidence that both northern and southern armies experienced revival during the war years, it is also true that many fell to temptations that were not as available at home.¹³

Flight from occupying forces was another significant reason for the emigration of people out of their local churches. Certainly, the Waco churches did not experience much of this during the war, but for congregations in Louisiana and other occupied areas this was a major concern. Flight was particularly common among wealthy southern women. According to historian Drew Gilpin Faust, “As more and more men left for the battlefield, the refugee population became overwhelmingly female.”¹⁴ This conclusion is supported by the records from First Baptist

¹³ Woodworth, *While God is Marching On*, 84-89.

¹⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 40.

Church's sister church First Presbyterian Church in Waco, where of the refugees who arrived in 1863, five out of six were women.¹⁵ Occupation certainly presented other challenges to congregations as well (such as denominational liturgy requiring some congregations to pray for a president that they did not support), but the threat of losing many members of the church was undoubtedly one of the most significant.

The Waco churches experienced the opposite problem from churches in occupied areas. Instead of facing diminishing numbers, these congregations increased significantly. First Presbyterian was a very small church during the Civil War. Therefore, the six people who came in 1863 may have represented as much as a thirty percent increase in the size of the congregation.¹⁶ Any organization that grows that rapidly is bound to have difficulties. At the very least, new people bring with them their own sensibilities and traditions which can challenge the culture of a community. Compounding the raw numbers is the overarching emphasis on church discipline. Because refugees often did not have letters of dismissal, accepting them represented a threat to the purity and unity of the local church. This statement may sound extreme, but it is rooted in the numerous examples of people being excluded from the church for various improprieties. The churches took accountability seriously; refugees could disrupt regulated order.

Refugees presented a second problem to the churches that absorbed them into local fellowship: at the end of the war, many returned home. An entry in the minutes of First Presbyterian Church from 1867 indicates that virtually all the refugees who had joined the congregation during the war had disappeared. This left the church in doubt as to how to handle

¹⁵ First Presbyterian, Minute Book A, 5.

¹⁶ First Presbyterian, Minute Book A, 8.

their absence. Ordinarily, if a congregant missed too many services, they could be investigated for forsaking the fellowship, but these people were simply gone. Obviously, it was not possible to hold these absent people accountable. Nevertheless, the return of refugees to their home communities left people on the roles of First Presbyterian who were clearly no longer part of the local church. Church elders were forced to address this and other problems created by the mass movements of people during the war years.

The problem of soldiers going off to war was a difficult challenge for local congregations to address. The very nature of enlistment signified separation from the church body. Two main methods for handling this issue are exemplified in the minutes First Baptist Church. First, some soldiers went before the church asking for letters of watch care from the congregation. This document was similar to a letter of dismissal in that it vouched for the integrity of the individual, but it differed because it did not separate the person from the church. Essentially, soldiers who received these letters could show them to other Baptist congregations for temporary fellowship while stationed in the area. Several soldiers requested and received letters in the early years of the war.¹⁷ Nevertheless, very few cases are recorded in the church minutes. This means that either letters were granted without entry into the minutes, or some left without seeking letters. Because of the consistency of the First Baptist Church minutes, the former option is highly unlikely. Many men clearly left without letters. Why this is the case is open to speculation. Perhaps they lacked commitment to the church. Possibly, they just assumed the church knew they were going. More likely, in the case of First Baptist congregants, they knew their own pastor was going with them as their chaplain, minimizing the need to directly associate with other churches near the front.

¹⁷ First Baptist Church, Minute Book B, 39.

Attempting to serve the troops directly by sending chaplains was in fact the second major method for addressing the spiritual health of the soldier. Rufus C. Burluson was not alone in joining the army as a clergyman. Across the country, pastors volunteered to accompany troops. Usually, chaplains were assigned at the regimental level, but a lack of numbers often meant that a chaplain ended up serving multiple regiments within his brigade, division, or corps.¹⁸ As noted above, this solution for ministering to the troops negatively affected the church they left behind. Furthermore, the quality of chaplains varied dramatically. Some were very active in the lives of the soldiers, with a few even going into battle with their flocks. Others were often absent or far back from the front leaving soldiers to face the dangers of war alone.¹⁹ Hallock Armstrong, a Union chaplain serving at Petersburg complained, “As far as I know I am the only chaplain that stays with the men, and endures the same dangers with them. Others manage to get quartered in the rear.”²⁰ Despite these criticisms, chaplaincy remained one of the most important and effective methods for ministering to the soldiers.

Churches also addressed the issues of refugees out of necessity. In the case of First Presbyterian, the congregation accepted every person mentioned in the minutes who claimed to be a refugee from the war.²¹ However, the church secretary elaborated in every instance about the extenuating circumstances. According to the minutes, lack of letters from home churches was the fault of the enemy who drove the refugees out of their homes, not the fault of the

¹⁸ Woodworth, *While God is Marching On*, 153.

¹⁹ Woodworth, *While God is Marching On*, 150-151.

²⁰ Hallock Armstrong, “Letter from Hallock Armstrong to Mary Armstrong, March 5, 1865,” in *Letters from a Pennsylvania Chaplain at the Siege of Petersburg, 1865* (Privately Published, 1961), 47.

²¹ First Presbyterian, Minute Book A, 5-8.

refugees themselves.²² All it took for a refugee to become a member of the church was a statement of faith. First Baptist also generally accepted refugees by a statement of faith, but in at least one case, a committee was appointed to examine the applicant. This case does appear to be an outlier as it involved a congregation that had split.²³ Nevertheless, it is instructive, because it indicates that the church was offering special dispensation to refugees by not having them go through all the normal steps required for admission without a letter.

Even as the white members of First Baptist Church wrestled with issues of membership among their part of the congregation, demographic shifts and concerns of the war affected African American membership within the church. In some ways, the national conflict actually benefited members of color within First Baptist, because it led to increased membership. However, it also prompted the white members of the congregation to take more interest in the membership of African Americans.

From 1861 to 1865, approximately forty African Americans joined the congregation, and of these, close to thirty joined in 1863 and 1864.²⁴ While these numbers may not seem large, compared to the size of the African American membership at the time, forty members amounts to a sizable increase. Remember, as of 1859, there were only fifty total African American members.²⁵ Of these many new members, most joined the church based on their testimony and subsequent baptisms.²⁶ While white members had always been more likely than black members to join based on a letter of dismissal, the fact that only a couple of new black members had letters

²² First Presbyterian, Minute Book A, 5-8.

²³ Minute Book B, First Baptist Church, 108.

²⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 32-151

²⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 126.

²⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 32-151.

is notable. This fact, along with the number of new members in the latter years of the war, supports the idea that many of these people may have been moved by their masters to the “safe” environment of Texas.

This concept fits with the well-established trends of the Civil War Era as many African Americans moved during the conflict. Some migrated by choice. As Union Armies made greater and greater inroads into the Deep South, large numbers of enslaved people of color fled from their enslavers to the Union Army.²⁷ During the war, Union Policy toward escaped persons shifted, but for the escapees themselves, many never returned to the land they were once forced to call home.²⁸ Sometimes, the flight of African Americans to the “safety” of Union forces had dire consequences. For example, in one instance, numerous formerly enslaved people drowned while trying to cross a river in an attempt to follow General William T. Sherman’s army as it marched through Georgia.²⁹ Nevertheless, for many black men, women, and children escape to Union lines meant the beginning of long sought freedom.

Many slave owners recognized the threat Union armies posed to their “property” and took active steps to prevent the escape or liberation of their enslaved workers. One factor that had always worked in the favor of the masters was that in most of the Antebellum South, slaves had great difficulty running away because of the tremendous distance between most plantations and free territory.³⁰ As Union armies marched through, this fact was no longer a reality. To address this, some slave owners began to send enslaved people to Texas.³¹ Although this option

²⁷ Steven E. Woodworth, *Sherman* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 156.

²⁸ Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War*.

²⁹ Woodworth, *This Great Struggle*, 320.

³⁰ Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 117-119.

³¹ Alwyn Barr. *Black Texans: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1995* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 36.

meant that the enslaved workers would not be available during the war, most slave owners believed they could bring them back once the war was over. This tactic had two main benefits for the slave owners. First, it put the enslaved laborers out of reach of Union armies. Second, it helped to prevent escapes, because in Texas (especially on the edge of American settlement) any escapee would have no good place to run. Texas is so large that most runaways could be caught before they made it out of the state. Even if someone could make it out, they would end up in other slave states or territory controlled by Native Americans.³²

From the records of First Baptist Church, it is evident that this was the story of at least some of the new African American members in the later years of the war. Beyond the spike in numbers itself, it is also notable that the number of African Americans who the records indicate served masters who were not part of the church increased.³³ Some of these owners do not even appear to have lived in Waco or McLennan County. The most notable example is General Long. Although the minutes do not reference his first name, cross referencing with known Confederate generals suggests that this may have been Brigadier General Armistead L. Long, a Virginian who served in the Army of Northern Virginia.³⁴ It is obvious from the wording that he was not a member of the church, and if he was, indeed, A. L. Long, he never lived in Waco. Nevertheless, in August 1864, ten new African American members joined First Baptist Church, all of whom the clerk listed as “servants of Gen. Long.”³⁵ As it would be extremely unlikely that 100 percent of any group would join the same church (or all join a church for that matter), the ten people who

³² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 32-151.

³³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 138.

³⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 138.

³⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 138.

joined First Baptist were likely part of an even larger group of enslaved workers sent to Texas. The ten who joined First Baptists all did so by testimony.³⁶

This growth could strain any organization, but in the shadow of the Civil War, it was even more pronounced. The white members of the church witnessed this influx at the same time that many of the white male members of the church were away serving in the Confederate military. In fact, studies indicate that a majority of white male citizens of Waco served in the Civil War.³⁷ This swing meant that not only was the African American membership within the church growing, but also that the proportion of white to black members actually present was even more prominent. This shift in demographics along with general pressure on the white community prompted the white members of the church to take a more active role in the administration of black membership.

Most African American members continued to be welcomed into the church by the conference that followed the African American service on Sunday evenings, but with the large influx of new members, some of those new additions rose to the notice of the white portion of the church. In most of these cases, it seems that African Americans went before the regular church conference which then referred them to the Sunday evening conference. The white members did deal entirely with one highly irregular case involving an enslaved black man named Titus.³⁸ In December 1863, his master (listed as Mr. Yell) came before the regular church conference on his behalf to certify that Titus was not only a Baptist but also a preacher.³⁹ This was highly unusual, because admission of any person to the church was always driven by the

³⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 138.

³⁷ Simpson, *Gaines Mill to Appomattox*.

³⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 127.

³⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 127.

person who was attempting to join. It is possible that Titus asked his master to go before the church, but this is unknown. What is certain, is that the records contain no mention of Titus before his master attended the regular conference. With this unusual circumstance, the regular conference referred the case to a committee of elders instead of to the African American conference.⁴⁰ The following month, the committee reported that they had not found any evidence to support Mr. Yell's claims and requested more time. Instead, the church conference dismissed the committee and dropped the case. It appears that Titus never joined First Baptist or preached in the African American service.

In addition to direct involvement in some African American admissions to the church, increased white scrutiny of the African American community is also evident in how the minutes address the addition of new black members. The most notable thing in this regard is that the white members seemed to be more attentive to white slave owners who were not a part of the church but whose "servants" wished to join. Several entries after 1861 note the white slave holder's approval of their enslaved worker joining the church.⁴¹ Such notation is never present in the minutes for the first decade of the church's existence. This does not mean that the white members of the church did not account for nonmember masters' wishes before 1861, but the fact that the clerk began intentionally noting the approval is important. To some degree it could be an effort to shield the church from any allegations of undermining the slave-holding system of the South during the Civil War. It could also be to provide record if a slaveholder outside of the church ever claimed that his "servant" was attending the church without permission. Regardless, the specific notation of master approval demonstrates heightened awareness of the system of

⁴⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 128.

⁴¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 101.

slavery and the African American membership which were both ever present within First Baptist Church.

The tremendous growth among people of color in First Baptist is also evident in the fact that it necessitated new deacon ordinations to serve the growing population. After October 1860, the Sunday evening conference elected five new African American deacons.⁴² These included Henry, John, Isaac, Shadrack, and Hiram. Interestingly, despite the clear need, the minutes do not contain evidence that two of these men (Isaac and Shadrack) were ever ordained as deacons. Apparently, the regular church conference tabled their nomination after it was forwarded from the Sunday evening African American conference.⁴³ Even though there was clear need, the white members of the church failed to support the nominations. Again, this may be due to outside pressure, or it could simply have resulted from the confusion and struggles with white leadership at the time. Although the white members did not move to ordain Isaac or Shadrack, their election demonstrates the growth of the African American community and the continued forward-thinking activity of black members. Eventually, the white members of the church came to recognize this need, because they finally approved Hiram about six months after tabling the elections of the previous two candidates. It is important to note that while not all of the new deacon candidates actually served the church, every election began within the African American community. Despite resistance from the white members of the church, the black members kept moving forward.

The dramatic increase in African American membership coupled with increased oversight from the white members of the church meant that issues of church discipline involving black

⁴² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 63-151.

⁴³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 63-151.

members became much more common. As seen in chapter three, only a handful of cases involving African American members had risen to the attention of the church. This changed significantly during the war. From 1861 to 1865, the conference investigated at least seven African American members on serious charges.⁴⁴ This may seem like a small number, but it was double the cases of the previous decade in half of the number of years.

The issues of church discipline involving African Americans in the early 1860s fall into two main categories: charges of adultery and charges of disorderly/unchristian character. Four of the present cases fall into the first category.⁴⁵ This is not necessarily surprising, because all three cases from the 1850s had revolved around similar charges. As in the early years of the church, every case of this time resulted in exclusion from the church. One of the most noteworthy cases of this category was the charge against Mariah who had previously been excluded and then restored. In June 1861, the church excluded her again. As with the previous case, they convicted her of adultery.⁴⁶ Other members who faced exclusion under this charge were Spencer, John, and Amanda. Of these three, the minutes specifically note that John and Amanda confessed to the charge while Spencer apparently did not.⁴⁷ John is a unique case because while he was ultimately excluded for fornication, his initial charge was of disorderly/unchristian conduct, the other major infraction mentioned in the minutes.⁴⁸

Where adultery had been a common (though infrequent) complaint against black members of the church, disorderly conduct was new. Before 1860, only white members had

⁴⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 68-151.

⁴⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 68-151.

⁴⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 77.

⁴⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 77, 117, 131.

⁴⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 102.

faced such a charge. Disorderly conduct was in some sense a more difficult charge than adultery, because its content was vague. Two of the three cases involving this charge went to committees, before the conference as a whole eventually excluded the individuals in question. An African American woman named Martha serves as an interesting example of this more complicated process. In January 1861, she rose to the attention of the church because of her “dissatisfaction,” and a committee formed to address the issue.⁴⁹ At the following monthly meeting, she “Acknowledged her error.”⁵⁰ With this confession, the church decided to “labor with her.”⁵¹ Although it is unclear, presumably here disaffection had something to do with doctrine and the church wanted to help her work through the questions. The next mention of Martha is in the minutes for July 1861. At that month’s conference, the membership excluded her for disorder.⁵² Apparently, the committee’s “labor” failed to produce the desired results.

The increase in cases prompts an observer to question why this occurred in the Civil War era. One simple answer could be that there were simply more African American members, so there likewise would naturally be more cases. On the surface, this makes sense, but it does not fully explain the rise in cases because of the much shorter timeframe in which the war era cases occurred. If the rise in cases resulted strictly from the rise in population, then the expectation would be that double the number of cases would occur in the same time frame as the previous decade. Instead, double the number of cases rose to the attention of the church in half as many years. Another possible explanation is that the black members of the church simply committed more actions that the church found worthy of exclusion during the war years than before.

⁴⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 68.

⁵⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 71.

⁵¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 71.

⁵² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 79.

Although it cannot be definitively disproven, this statement is also unsatisfactory. Standards for admission had not changed; hence, it is unlikely that new members were less moral in the eyes of the church than the previous members. Indeed, at least two of the people investigated by the church conference had joined the church before the 1860s.⁵³

What is more likely is that the increased scrutiny that resulted from more white attention to the African American Sunday evening service caused the spike in cases of discipline. As demonstrated, it seems that the African American members largely dealt with both admission and dismissal/exclusion of black members before the 1860s. With the advent of a permanent committee of white elders and lay leaders designated to attend and oversee the Sunday evening service, it makes sense that the presence of the panel would influence (either directly or indirectly) everything that occurred at the African American conferences. More white oversight likely meant more cases. Recall that at this time white members were likely more concerned than before the war about keeping order and high standards among the African American members. This accounts for not only the increase in cases, but also the previously unheard-of charge (among black members) of disorderly conduct.

The presence of more white members at the Sunday evening service likely affected membership and discipline of African American members in a few different ways. The most obvious reason white members could affect these cases is through their votes. While the church records do not directly confirm that the white men who formed the committee to oversee the African American service voted as part of their conference, it is very likely that they did. As per the church constitution, all members present at a church meeting could vote on business.⁵⁴

⁵³ First Baptist, Minute Book B; First Baptist, Roster Book.

⁵⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 53.

Because the Sunday evening conference was an official meeting of the church, white members would be fully within their rights to vote at that assembly. While these votes would still have been a minority in the context of the African American service, they could potentially have swayed an outcome especially on any meeting that was lightly attended by black members. It is theoretically possible that some of the white leaders who attended the African American service abstained from voting, but there is no evidence that this was done or even that any of them would have been inclined to do so.

Beyond simply affecting the conference's votes, white members likely had an even more significant effect on the conference. Anyone who studies the use of force knows that the most basic level of force is physical presence.⁵⁵ If an authority figure (whether official or unofficial) is simply in the room, it can impact how people speak and act. The presence of more white leaders could alter the flow of conversation by influencing which topics came up for discussion or even by outright blocking certain subjects. As white members had always been allowed to attend the Sunday evening conference, this likely had already happened to an extent, but increased numbers of white members after 1861 would magnify their impact. Moreover, the white members present during the war years would likely have been more vocal, because they had been empowered by the regular Saturday evening conference to superintend the African American service. New member candidates would need to convince not only their fellow African Americans, but also the various white leaders present at the service. In relation to church discipline, white members could undoubtedly raise issues themselves, but it is also

⁵⁵ National Institute of Justice, "The Use-of-Force Continuum," August 3, 2009, [nij.ojp.gov: https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/use-force-continuum](https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/use-force-continuum).

possible that black members brought charges more readily due to the presence of the white members.

In the context of the war years, it makes sense that the white members of the church would take more interest in matters of fellowship among the black membership of First Baptist. More direct activity in these matters was yet another response to the many pressures on the church. Remember, at least some in the wider community of Waco wanted to shut down the African American service. White members likely believed that by taking a more direct role in the affairs of the African American service that they were in fact protecting that service from dissolution. To some degree, this feeling may have been true. In the face of political pressure to close the service, some action was likely required to satisfy the town council. If asked why the increase in oversight, this may have been their response.

Even if many white members of the church would have said that they were increasing their supervision of the Sunday evening service in order to ensure that there continued to be a Sunday evening service, this statement undoubtedly does not fully describe the complex web of motives that many white members held (even if they did not recognize all of those motives). Like all other white people in the slave holding South, white members of First Baptist would still have been concerned about losing control. The activity of the African American community in pushing for more autonomy and leadership in addition to the rapidly increasing number of people of color in Waco likely prompted at least some of the drive to reassert white authority by 1861. Addressing issues of fellowship was one of the most direct ways to remind the African American community that the white dominated regular church conference still held ultimate authority in First Baptist Church.

The starkest expression of the link between church discipline and race within the was to be found in the investigations of two important African Americans within the church. As the Civil War raged, both preacher Stephen and a deacon named John faced serious charges. The investigations of these two men highlight how complicated the issues of discipline were in an era of conflict over authority. Contrary to what one might expect, the white members did not simply dictate how these critical cases would be resolved. However, they were far from inactive in the process. It is clear from the records that the white members of the congregation took more interest in the outcome of these cases than other instances of church discipline involving African American members. It appears that the Sunday evening conference still handled these cases, but they drew the direct attention of the white members of the church. Although detailed in the previous chapter, the case against Stephen Cobb merits a brief revisit in regard to the process of church discipline. As is extremely common in Baptist churches, the regular conference established a committee to investigate the allegations and recommend a penalty if they found him guilty. Interestingly, the committee consisted of four men, two of whom were white and two black. The minutes even directly state that it was intended to represent both communities within the church.⁵⁶ It is also important to note that the committee included four of the most important men within their respective communities. B. D. Arnold and R. B. Burlison represented the white members while deacons Henry and John spoke for the black members.⁵⁷

Less than a year after the investigation of Stephen, one of the men who served on his committee came up on charges of his own. In August 1862, the church received a complaint

⁵⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 86.

⁵⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 88.

about John during the Sunday evening conference.⁵⁸ The charge included both unchristian character and disorderly conduct. Unlike the case against Stephen which widely circulating rumor had prompted, this case arose from a specific complaint. The minutes do not specify exactly what prompted the charge, but it is clear from the context that it was very serious as the conference excluded another member for the same charge during the meeting that August.⁵⁹ As with Stephen's case, the church commissioned a committee which included two black members and two white members to investigate. These four men were all prominent leaders in the church.⁶⁰ In Stephen's case, the committee did its work, and the conference resolved the issue the following month. For John, the investigation dragged on much longer. Seven months' worth of minutes go by before the case against John reappears in the record of a regular Saturday conference in April 1863.⁶¹

This is one of the only cases in which the regular (white) conference directly addressed an issue of discipline with the African American community. Members of the white community were greatly dissatisfied with how long the case had dragged on, so they appointed a committee of five men to investigate the situation and report to the African American conference.⁶² Several key facts about this committee differed from the original committee in addition to the fact that it originated from the regular conference. First, all five members were white leaders in the church including arguably the most prominent men in the congregation. Joseph W. Speight and Noah Crain (who were recently back from the war) joined B.D. Arnold, R. B. Burleson, and E. H.

⁵⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 102.

⁵⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 102.

⁶⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 102.

⁶¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 116.

⁶² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 116.

Hardin.⁶³ On motion, Rufus C. Burlson (who must have been on leave) also joined the committee.⁶⁴ Second, the conference charged the committee with investigating the case and reporting to the African American conference the following day.⁶⁵ One day is not much time to investigate. Despite the wording, it seems clear that the white members of the church already believed that John was guilty and wanted to force action on the part of the black members.

The following day, the committee reported to the Sunday evening conference that John confessed to fornication.⁶⁶ The church then debated his fate. Ultimately, the members voted to exclude him from the fellowship of the church.⁶⁷ This outcome is not surprising given the nature of the confession, but it is notable that the case dragged on so long and inspired much controversy. In many cases of discipline, someone brought charges and the case was resolved all in the same conference meeting. Serious cases did elicit investigative committees, but even so most investigations concluded within a month or two. In the end, it was the African American conference which excluded John, but clearly, some resistance fought this decision.⁶⁸ It is possible that if the white members had not stepped into the situation, John's case never would have come back before the African American conference, he never would have confessed, and would not have been excluded. As it was, the white members of the church prevented this possible outcome.

The cases against John and Stephen highlight the complex nature of church discipline (which in and of itself can be fraught with difficulty) in the period of heightened racial tension

⁶³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 116.

⁶⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 116.

⁶⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 117.

⁶⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 117.

⁶⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 117.

⁶⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 117.

during the Civil War. Both Stephen and John were well respected members of the African American community; therefore, their cases became a focal point of the broader conflict over authority in First Baptist Church. With John in particular, it seems clear that at least some members of the black community attempted to stall the process and maintain their respected leader despite the charges against him. The minutes do not record who brought the initial charge, but it is possible that a white member made the complaint. If this is the case, some members of color could have seen the situation as an attempt to further diminish their leadership within the church. Many white members likely would have said that they just wanted to maintain the standards of the church to preserve the unity of the body. Nevertheless, the case also demonstrated that the white regular conference was not ready for the autonomy toward which African American members were working. The pain and conflict of the war years would not be in vain as this labor would finally achieve success in the year after the Civil War.

Chapter Seven

A New Hope: The Formation of an Independent African American Church

As the Civil War came to an end, much changed for the people of the South including those who lived in McLennan County. The most notable change is that ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was part of the requirements for states to return to the Union.¹ Although Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation years earlier, it had not affected Waco as there were no Union troops to implement the policy. The abolition of slavery after the war brought significant change to the local community and the rest of the South. Before considering the effects of abolition on the congregation of First Baptist Church, it is necessary to address the reaction to the end of slavery more generally.

With slavery illegal, formerly enslaved African Americans began to seek more autonomy and independence, but they met with resistance from many white southerners who wanted to maintain the antebellum world as much as possible.² Even with the passage of the Reconstruction amendments, Black people in the South found that they were not soon to gain the equality promised by the government. White men retained most of the levers of power in society and politics, so African Americans began to pull away from white society.³

One of the most obvious ways in which formerly enslaved people of color could assert their autonomy was by physically moving away from the plantations and other locations in which they had been held. Such a move offers immediate separation from the white people who were directly associated with their bondage. Migration further allowed freed people to search for

¹ Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, 85.

² Guelzo, *Reconstruction*, 62-63.

³ Daniel W. Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 80-81.

loved ones from who they had been separated. Noted historian Randolph B. Campbell estimates that as many of a quarter of African Americans in Texas left their former plantations within days of receiving news of emancipation.⁴ Based on the records of African Americans applying to leave First Baptist Waco, it is likely that the estimation holds true for McClennan County. Nevertheless, with only about twenty five percent of African American Texans moving, that meant that the significant majority stayed in the same environs in which they had been enslaved. Although now free, many continued to farm the land of their former masters under contracts as hired laborers or possibly become small independent farmers.⁵

Even for the many African Americans who did not move in the years immediately following the Civil War, there were several ways for them to exercise their newfound freedom. Forming independent societies, communities, and organizations proved to be the best way to ensure freedom from white oversight. This may sound counter intuitive to modern Americans, but to African Americans of the Reconstruction era, self-segregation was the best way to ensure autonomy and freedom. Even while forming their own communities, Black southerners sought education, political power, and religious autonomy.

In the wake of the Civil War, many people of color first sought something that had long been denied to them: education. Throughout much of the antebellum South, it had been illegal to teach African Americans how to read or write; therefore, many Black southerners were illiterate in the post war world.⁶ Even before the end of the war, this began to change in areas of Union occupation. As federal troops liberated enslaved people across the South, the government began

⁴ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 26.

⁵ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 269.

⁶ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 561-563.

to seek ways to help the recently freed. This led to the creation of the Freedman's Bureau.⁷ One of the chief purposes of this organization was to provide education to the African Americans of the South. Teachers who volunteered with the Freedman's Bureau taught basic literacy to thousands of students across the region.⁸ This learning was essential, because it helped give African Americans the tools to form organizations and be involved in government.

In addition to basic literacy, many African Americans also sought more advanced education for themselves and particularly for their children. They realized that education was a key to affecting the independence and equality promised them in the Reconstruction amendments. With this goal in mind, they began to form schools to teach children a full slate of primary education often with the assistance of the Freedman's Bureau or religious organizations.⁹ Many of these new schools hired white teachers from the North, but overtime, they had more and more African American educators.¹⁰ The children who came through these new schools had a foundation for involvement in society on equal educational footing with many of their white contemporaries.¹¹

Like many other areas across the south, African Americans in Waco and McLennan County received aide from the Freedman's Bureau especially in education. During the reconstruction period, a bureau associated teacher moved to Waco to teach children and adults.

⁷ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 68-70.

⁸ Alwyn Barr. *Black Texans: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1995* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 60-65.

⁹ Alwyn Barr. *Black Texans: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1995* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 60-65.

¹⁰ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 145.

¹¹ Barry A. Crouch, *The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Texans* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1992).

As with all teachers working for the bureau, this man report information to his superior on the progress of education in his region. With the aid of local organizations (notably African American Christian organizations), the bureau helped teach many people of color to read and write in addition to other subjects.

Beyond primary education, forward thinking African Americans and white allies realized that advanced education for people of color was essential. Therefore, they began to found colleges for African American students. Most of the famous historically black colleges and universities across the South came into existence during this time.¹² These schools provided avenues for African Americans to pursue careers in education, medicine, law, and many other fields. Of course, many African Americans never went to college, but the opportunity to do so provided a path forward for those who did and an opportunity to lift up the community as a whole.

In tandem with education, African Americans also sought advancement through political engagement. With the fifteenth amendment guaranteeing African American men the right to vote, many formerly enslaved men began advocating for themselves through the ballot box. As black people began to engage with politics, the majority aligned with the Republican Party.¹³ It was the Republicans who had brought about emancipation and who were pushing forward the Reconstruction amendments and other legislation. The Republicans were also at the forefront of the educational initiatives. In contrast, as the Democrats began to regain power in the South they tried to limit African American political involvement and influence.¹⁴

¹² Foner, *Reconstruction*, 145.

¹³ Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, 129.

¹⁴ Allen C. Guelzo, *Reconstruction: A Concise History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 115.

When modern Americans think of the post-Civil War South, most probably think of the Jim Crow era with tight legal segregation and political disenfranchisement of people of color. This was not, however, the reality in the immediate wake of the American Civil War. Through heavy federal involvement, many African Americans were able to exercise their right to vote and did so in large numbers. Throughout the South, Black voters combined with white republicans to elect Republican officials. Some of these men were Northerners who had moved to the South at the end of the war while others were pro-Union Southerners who switched to the Republican party after the failure of the war years.¹⁵ White southern Democrats particularly despised these individuals.

Black southerners not only engaged through the vote, but some also ran for office. The efficacy of these campaigns varied, but the results are impressive overall. In some regions, African Americans comprised a majority of the local population. These areas witnessed the election of Black men as local officials including to the extremely important post of county sheriff.¹⁶ At the state and federal levels, African Americans ran for positions in both state legislatures and the federal congress. The late 1860s and early 1870s witnessed many black men being elected to serve in the United States House of Representatives and a few as United States senators though election by state legislatures.¹⁷ Waco itself sent one African American man to Austin as a member of the State House of Representatives in in the late 1860s.¹⁸ While these

¹⁵ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 427.

¹⁶ Alwyn Barr. *Black Texans*, 48.

¹⁷ Guelzo, *Reconstruction*, 57.

¹⁸ Patricia Ward Wallace, *Waco: Texas Crossroads* (Woodland Hills, California: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1983), 32.

trends did not last into the last decades of the nineteenth century, they demonstrate the almost immediate political engagement of the African American community after the Civil War.

As with other areas of their lives, Black Christians began to seek autonomy in their practice of religion.¹⁹ Throughout much of the South in most major denominations, African Americans had had little to no autonomy except in the older eastern cities that contained significant populations of free African Americans. While some black Christians already worshiped in their own services (as was the case with First Baptist of Waco), many still worshiped in the back or balconies of white controlled churches with little or no say in the proceedings.²⁰ From these starting points African American religious practice began to change as the war came to an end.

The main reason that African American Christians began to move away from their white counterparts was that they accurately perceived that despite the promise of equality, they would not find it in white dominated organizations including churches.²¹ Black Christians primarily left white churches to form their own for the same reasons that they formed their own communities, businesses, and schools. In organizations controlled by white men, they would not quickly be able to exert any authority. The promise of political equality did not directly translate to private organizations. In the mind of African Americans, the only way to experience freedom was to do so separately from white communities.

In churches that had maintained tight control over the African American community, the first step was often the formation of a separate service for Black members under the authority of

¹⁹ Nicole Myers Tuner, *Soul Liberty: The Evolution of Black Religious Politics in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 2.

²⁰ Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion*, 73.

²¹ Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion*, 83.

the original church.²² This had already happened in Waco at First Baptist Church, but for many African Americans it only occurred after the war was over. From that starting point, many black Christians began to leave white dominated churches entirely in favor of starting their own churches.²³ In the years immediately after the Civil War, possibly as high as ninety-eight percent of African Americans left white churches.²⁴ Communities like the African American membership of First Baptist Waco had an advantage in this regard and, therefore, moved faster than many of their contemporaries.

Even as black southerners were negotiating the new world of the post-bellum South, many white Southerners adversely reacted to the newfound freedom and legal status of African Americans. The world was changing radically, and this demanded a response from white people who had previously held all the reins of power and fought a war to maintain that power. The responses of white people varied greatly but can be considered within three main categories: resistance, acceptance, and support.

The most obvious broad category of responses to the reconstruction of the South and its implications for southern society is resistance. Many southerners were extremely unhappy with federal interference in their states and the freedom and legal equality of African Americans.²⁵ This led to conflict as many southerners tried to prevent or at least limit the scope of the change. Some resistance efforts took the form of violence, while others came through politics or social organizations.

²² Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion*, 86.

²³ Turner, *Soul Liberty*, 20.

²⁴ Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, 41.

²⁵ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 276.

The development of the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist groups represents the most famous form of violent resistance to Reconstruction.²⁶ Members of the Klan and similar organizations perpetrated many heinous crimes to maintain white control over the South. As Black southerners began to seek political involvement and education, some white men resorted to lynching and other acts of violent intimidation to prevent Black men from exercising their legal rights.²⁷ In addition to African Americans, vigilantes targeted white people who worked alongside the Black community. Northerners who went south to teach or take government posts and white men who openly supported the Republican Party, or its policies, were in particular danger.²⁸ Although rarely remembered, violent resistance to Reconstruction was met with decisive action from the Grant administration to the point that the Klan was driven underground in the 1870s.²⁹

Waco was no exception to the violence that was endemic throughout the South, during the period of Reconstruction, but it was not particularly common (at least in Waco) in the first couple of years immediately following the war. The violence escalated after the beginning of the Congressional (“Radical”) phase of reconstruction in which the Federal Congress dominated by Republicans asserted control over the process by impeaching and overruling the objections of President Andrew Johnson. During this time, Waco experienced a shootout between white and Black residents in 1870.³⁰ Both the Ku Klux Klan and similar groups also operated within Waco during the period, and although data is not available to determine the exact number of

²⁶ Guelzo, *Reconstruction*, 64.

²⁷ Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, 85.

²⁸ Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, 85.

²⁹ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 457-459.

³⁰ Wallace, *Waco: Texas*, 31.

victims of their crimes, one U.S. Army general reported that the number of murdered was “. . . impossible to keep an accurate account of them.”³¹

Violent resistance was by no means the only resistance to reconstruction efforts, nor was it the most effective. As the Northern population grew tired of prolonged involvement in the South, white southerners who opposed abolition and other aspects of Reconstruction began to regain political power at both state and local levels.³² The more Democrats attained office, the more they could stand in the way of and even roll back the policies of Reconstruction. This effort proved extremely successful until 1877, when Southern congressmen used the disputed presidential election to remove federal troops from the South and effectively end Reconstruction.³³

Waco and McLennan County were central to the efforts of Texas Democrats to remove Republican officials from the state government. The Radical Phase of Reconstruction white Waco residents had conflicted with a republican county Judge who had been appointed by the state government and who himself appointed many “radical” deputy sheriffs for the county.³⁴ By 1873, support for the democrat party had regained strength and in a contentious election, Waco resident and Democrat candidate Richard Coke defeated the Republican governor of the state E.J. Davis. After a standoff, Davis eventually relinquished control to Coke despite the Texas Supreme Court having ruled that the election was illegitimate.³⁵

³¹ General J.J. Reynolds as quoted in Wallace, *Waco: Texas*, 32.

³² Guelzo, *Reconstruction*, 106.

³³ Guelzo, *Reconstruction*, 113.

³⁴ Wallace, *Waco: Texas*, 32.

³⁵ Kelley, *Handbook of Texas History*, 64.

Even as it had great statewide implications by effectively ending Reconstruction in Texas, Coke's election was also a major boon to Waco and McLennan County. Following the election, Waco benefited from both financial and political support from the new administration. With stated aid, local leaders brought the railroad to McLennan County and completed a new suspension bridge over the Brazos River which at the time was the largest such bridge in the world. This development of infrastructure helped Waco to grow tremendously as by 1890, it would more than quadruple its Civil War era population.³⁶ This economic and physical growth helped to make Waco one of the most important cities in central Texas in latter years of the nineteenth century.

Outside of political activity, white southerners also resisted Black enfranchisement and other aspects of Reconstruction through social organizations including churches. White leaders, including religious elders, could and did place obstacles in the way of African Americans attaining equality in southern society despite the constitutional and legislation at the federal level.³⁷ In the case of churches for example, elders could refuse to offer letters of dismissal to Black members or to include new Black churches within their denominational organizations. Through these and other efforts, white leaders could limit African American efforts at independence even as they denied them equality within social organizations.

While many white Southerners actively resisted Reconstruction, others responded with ambivalence. After years of fighting and suffering from the consequences of occupation, many southerners simply wanted the conflict to be over. While most of these did not support the Federal government or its policies, neither did they offer direct resistance to the new state of the

³⁶ Wallace, *Waco: Texas*, 32

³⁷ Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion*, 83.

country. Even after the Civil War, many white southerners were small farmers who mostly focused on their day to day lives. The reality was that rebuilding a farm that had fallen into disrepair took great time and energy. This effort and the disillusionment at the outcome of the war distracted from the broader political consequences of the conflict.

The other reality that prompted reluctant acceptance among many southern whites was the presence of Union troops throughout the South in the years after the Civil War. Even if they had wanted to resist, many citizens of southern states would not have wanted to risk the consequences of doing so. Violent resistance could easily result in a prison sentence or worse and for many with families, the risk was simply too great.³⁸ Moreover, some saw the war itself as the resistance that had failed.³⁹ In their minds, more conflict would only make things worse than they already were. All these people may have been upset at their own situations or that of the South more generally, but for them it was not enough to prompt action.

In addition to resistance or reluctant acceptance, one more broad category of response was possible: support. Although this was undoubtedly the least chosen response among white southerners, its manifestation was visible throughout Southern society.⁴⁰ Those who supported Reconstruction could do so by assisting Union troops in combatting the Klan and other perpetrators of violent reprisals. They could also actively assist the Freedman's Bureau with education efforts. While many people who took on this job were from the North, the organization did include some white southerners.⁴¹

³⁸ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 457-459.

³⁹ Eugene D. Genovese, *A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the White Christian South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1976), 101.

⁴⁰ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 297.

⁴¹ Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, 65.

A number of white southerners including some prominent former Confederates supported Reconstruction by taking positions in Reconstruction governments or supporting Reconstruction policies from elected state and local positions.⁴² Beyond the elected officials themselves, there were some white southerners who voted for Republican candidates. Even if they never did anything else to support Reconstruction, that act alone was significant.

At the local level, men and women could support Reconstruction through social organizations and practices. Even as some used these bodies to resist reconstruction, others could use them to support reconstruction and the African American community. One of the most obvious things that the white southerners could do was to listen to the desires and then support the efforts of Black people in their communities. While this kind of response may have been rare, as will soon be seen that it did happen in at least a few instances in the post-bellum South.

Given the context and general trends of the Reconstruction Era, it should not be surprising that after the end of the American Civil War African American members of First Baptist Church of Waco sought to leave the church in order to form their own congregation. As with all the developments in First Baptist Church, the manifestation of this desire would depend on the actions of both Black and white members of the congregation and interactions between the two groups.

In addition to the many reasons that African Americans sought independent congregations, the black members of First Baptist had several specific reasons for wanting autonomy. The war years had been difficult for the church in myriad ways and had strained the relationship between white and Black members. As has been seen, pressure from the outside community had prompted more white oversight of the African American service and led to the

⁴² Foner, *Reconstruction*, 297.

temporary cessation of Stephen's preaching to the community.⁴³ While the war raged and slavery remained in place, the African American members could do little about these grievances, but with the end of the war, they had the opportunity to act.

Leaving First Baptists to form a separate church would ensure that the white Baptists of Waco could no longer directly oversee or exert influence over the African American community. This would mean that those who joined could manage the congregation, appoint deacons, and call pastors without white oversight. If they called a pastor, there would be no white body present to ask him not to preach. For the African Americans in First Baptist Church, the move to form a separate church made especially good sense, because of the steps toward autonomy that the community had already taken. Black members of the congregation had been managing African American membership for over a decade and had also already had Black deacons serving their community.⁴⁴ An independent church was the logical next step.

It is critical to note that Stephen and the other Black members of First Baptist wanted a separate church, but they were not looking to leave the denomination or break all ties with their fellow white Baptists. Most of them were committed not just to Christianity, but specifically to the denomination.⁴⁵ Stephen himself had already been recognized as a preacher within the denomination, so his doctrine was undoubtedly sound (from a Baptist perspective).

In addition to wanting to maintain denominational ties, there was another practical reason to maintain a good relationship with First Baptist Church. First Baptist and the denomination as a whole could offer resources and support that would not be present if the African American members broke the relationship as they left the church. Even in the case of modern church

⁴³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 88.

⁴⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 26.

⁴⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 165.

plants, it is often an individual church or a denominational body that sponsors the new congregation. This sponsorship often entails monetary resources, the use of facilities, and doctrinal support in the form of staff development of the new pastor. While the process was not as defined in the mid-nineteenth century as it is today, the need for support would have still been present as the Black members of First Baptist began to contemplate leaving the church to form their own community.

Because of their desire to remain Baptists in good standing, the African American members of First Baptist Church could not simply leave without the blessing of the white portion of the church. Although the minutes do not speak of the movement for an independent African American church until the entry for May 1866, several precursory steps occurred in the year between the end of the war and the formal dismissal of the African American members. At the end of the war, the African American members of First Baptist Church began to look for more independence, but the first step in this direction was not to seek complete separation from the white members of the church. In December 1865, the conference of Black members raised \$207 dollars to support a separate meeting house for the African American community that could also serve as a school.⁴⁶ As has been noted, the Black members of the church had been worshipping separately from the white members for over a decade, but they had been doing so on Sunday evenings in the main church building. Having a separate facility would allow them to worship on Sunday mornings.

The fact that the new building could also double as a school should not be underestimated. In fact, it is possible that this was more important to the African Americans than

⁴⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 158.

having their services at a separate location. The minutes indicate that in addition to the money raised that evening, the African American members appointed a committee to raise more money for a school. That committee included Stephen (now using and being listed with the last name Cobb) who was arguably the most prominent Black member of the church.⁴⁷ Building a new house of worship/school is particularly illustrative of the general trends of the era, because it seeks to achieve two of the most common goals of African Americans after the end of slavery.

It must also be noted that although there is no mention of this new building before the entry for December 1865, members of the church undoubtedly were discussing it in the months before the actual offering was taken. This is evident for two main reasons. First, raising significant amounts of money is not something that can be done instantaneously. For the African American members of the church to collect over two hundred dollars, they would certainly have needed time to prepare for the offering. It is likely that they had been discussing the idea since shortly after word of the outcome of the war had reached Texas. Second, action of this scale could not have been contemplated without the white portion of the church holding opinions or weighing in on the idea. Before it was officially brought up in a church meeting, leaders in the African American community most likely discussed the idea with the elders of the church. Remember at this point the Black members of the church were not discussing fully leaving; therefore, decisions about funds and property would have required the blessing of the full Saturday church conference.⁴⁸

The following spring, the move toward independence came to a head. In March, a second collection increased the funds available for a separate African American house of

⁴⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 158.

⁴⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 9-13.

worship.⁴⁹ If the second offering was close to the first, it would have brought the total collection to approximately four hundred dollars. This may not sound like much to modern Americans, but that sum would be the equivalent of over ten thousand dollars when adjusted for inflation.⁵⁰

Despite this, they still would have needed more funding based on the costs of construction in the era.⁵¹ This funding issue would ultimately be solved by cross denominational organization.

With funding falling into place, the African American community selected Stephen Cobb and another leader named Ben for the ministry in April 1866.⁵² While this was a major step forward, ordination would require Baptist elders to perform the ceremony and, therefore, the support of the white members of the church.

May 1865 was a very busy month for the people of First Baptist Church. At the beginning of the month, Stephen Cobb and Ben officially applied for ordination to the ministry.⁵³ This was a huge step, because ordination would make them equal to white ministers like Rufus C. Burleson. As with most large requests, a response from the white members of the church was not instantaneous as they referred the applications to a committee.⁵⁴ Undaunted, the Black members of the church drafted a formal resolution to form a “colored” church which they adopted at their African American conference toward the end of May.⁵⁵ Along with the resolution, they forwarded a request for the ordination of deacons and elders to the main church

⁴⁹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 161.

⁵⁰ Inflation Calculator, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

⁵¹ <https://www.quora.com/What-was-the-cost-of-building-a-home-in-America-during-the-1600s-1860s>.

⁵² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 164.

⁵³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 163.

⁵⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 163.

⁵⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 165.

conference. To fully separate, they would need the blessing of the white members of the church and official letters of dismissal.

Gaining the support of the white members of the church was necessary for several reasons. Most importantly, to maintain their standing as Baptists, they needed the elders of the church to ordain and commission the new leaders of the African American church. If the Black members left without approval, they could theoretically form their own church, but it would not officially be part of the Baptist denomination. Although all Baptist churches were independent congregations, the ties of fellowship through the process of ordination and joining in Baptist organizations was still very important. The members who had joined First Baptist were not just Christians, they were Baptists.

From a practical perspective, maintaining good relations with First Baptist was imperative. Having the support of First Baptist would greatly aid in relationships with the city government and wider community. Although African Americans were free, many white leaders did not respect the idea of equality. In an ideal world, the members of the new African American church could deal with the city on their own, but in the context of the immediate post-bellum years, the assistance of leaders from First Baptists (some of whom were leaders of the city as well as the church) would be enormously beneficial.⁵⁶ In fact, if the white members of First Baptist did not support the African American church, they could in theory use the local government to slow or even stop its development.

In terms of finances, the blessing of the white members of the church was also critical. Even though the money for the new church building/school had been raised during the African

⁵⁶ First Baptist, Roster Book; Kelley, *Handbook of Waco*, Appendix.

American service, that service was still part of First Baptist Church. If the African American members left without the support of the white members, it is likely that all the money previously raised could have been held by First Baptist Church.⁵⁷ This turn of events would be harsh and extremely unjust, but from a legal perspective, First Baptist would have been within its rights to keep the money raised before the African Americans left. Of course, the members of the Black community could go to court, but it is exceedingly unlikely that they would win. Even on the merits, they would have a difficult case to make, but in the context of the day it would have been almost impossible. If this series of events unfolded, it would mean that the new church would form with no place to worship and no funds to build a place to worship. Such a path would not have been impossible to travel, but it would have been much more difficult.

For the African American congregation to leave with the blessing of First Baptist Church, the church conference had to issue letters of dismissal to everyone who wanted to leave. This process was generally ordinary and routine. In fact, in the year between May 1865 and May 1866, a significant number of African American members had already applied for and received letters from the church.⁵⁸ However, despite the commonness of requesting letters, the context of the mass request in 1866 dramatically changed the nature of the request. Of the thirteen African American members who petitioned for dismissal prior to May 1866, most had joined the church in the later years of the war.⁵⁹ It is, therefore, likely that these individuals were not only leaving the church but leaving the area as well.⁶⁰ This was the most common reason to seek a letter of

⁵⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 9-13.

⁵⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 151, 154, 155, 157.

⁵⁹ First Baptist, Church Roster.

⁶⁰ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 138.

dismissal. Compared to this, the idea of most of the African American members who remained seeking letters to form a church was extraordinary.

With the official request submitted, it was then in the hands of the white membership. Three main responses were possible. The regular church conference could accept the request as submitted and grant the letters. This option would officially release the African American members and signal support for the effort to form a separate church. Conversely, the church conference could reject the request. This would mean that if the people left, they would be doing so without the support of the church, hampering efforts to build their own church or join a different Baptist church (which at the time did not exist in Waco). In something of a middle ground, the church conference could stall the decision by sending the petition to a committee. This would allow the white members to delay action with the hope that the issue would die in committee. It could also force conversation about the decision between leaders of the black and white portions of the church.

As history played out, the white members of the church granted letters of dismissal to the African American members. Moreover, in the letters, the church specifically noted that they were being granted so that the Black members could form their own church.⁶¹ The decision came at the first church conference in the month of June, so the African American community did not have to wait long for a response.⁶² Although that week may have been a bit tense, it is likely that the African American leaders had already been talking about the process with the elders of the church and the outcome was already more or less settled as seeking letters was the final step in a process that had been ongoing for months. Even though these letters were inherently different

⁶¹ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 166.

⁶² First Baptist, Minute Book B, 166.

from standard letters of dismissal, by the time the African American members formally requested the letters, there would have been little purpose in denying the petition or delaying the decision.

The issuing of letters does raise the question of why the white portion of the church would support the creation of a new African American church. The action would inherently meant ceding control over Blacks, which in the South was an atypical action upon the part of whites. In the context of the era, there were likely many reasons that the white community might have supported the separation. Unfortunately, the extant documents do not provide a detailed breakdown of the discussion in the minutes, but enough evidence exists that when considered in conjunction with the context of the era several possible motives come to light.

The most basic (and least cynical) idea is that the white members of the church sincerely wanted the best for the African American members and believed that supporting their decision to form their own congregation was the best way to do so. Given the history of the United States, it is easy to suppose that cooperation and genuine support could not be the primary reason for the actions of the white portion of the church, but based on the contemporary evidence, it is the most likely reason. It is clear from the minutes that the regular church conference took time to consider the motion during open session.⁶³ This means that the majority were for the idea and that it was a reasoned decision. Beyond offering letters of dismissal, the fact that the church also assented to ordaining elders and deacons points to sincerity of action. If the African American members had left without ordained leaders, this would have signaled a lack of support for the endeavor.

⁶³ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 166.

Despite genuine support being the most obvious answer, it is possible that some white members of First Baptist supported the measure for reasons other than the good of the African American members. For example, the requirement during the war that a certain number of white deacons and leaders be present at every meeting of the Black church undoubtedly put strain on the men tasked with the assignment.⁶⁴ By supporting the decision of the African Americans to leave, white members of the church no longer would have to exercise oversight over the Black members of the church nor bear any responsibility from them. In other words, some white members may have voted yes not for the benefit of members of color but for their own perceived benefit.

It is also possible that many of the white members of the Church were simply ambivalent to the issue. The reality was that while the deacons and elders maintained a close working relationship with the African American members of the church, many of the white members had little contact with the Black members, because few of them attended the African American meetings.⁶⁵ Therefore, many of the white members may not have cared whether the African American service remained under the umbrella of First Baptist Church or not. From this perspective, granting letters of dismissal may have been a relatively easy decision.

From a more cynical perspective, “allowing” the African Americans to leave the church had one other major advantage: it allowed the white members to avoid wrestling with the question of equality that had been raised by the failure of the Civil War and the Reconstruction Amendments. The Baptists were the most egalitarian of all the evangelical denominations, but they had been operating with an inherent contradiction in the form of the inequality between

⁶⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 79.

⁶⁵ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 79.

Black and white members. They had made this contradiction “work” by noting that even if all were equal before God, they were not equal socially or legally.⁶⁶ Emancipation brought this reasoning (as faulty as it may have been) into question. If slavery was no longer legal and Black people were entitled to all the rights of white people, then the justification to force them to remain second class citizens in the church disappeared. Accepting the request of the African American members enabled the white members of the church to acknowledge equality without actually changing their lives or practices.

With this in mind, the most controversial part of the request was likely not the letters of dismissal, but the ordination of Black men as elders. These African American elders would be equal to white elders. Again, there was no good religious justification to bar Black men from positions of leadership, but it may have been hard for some white members of the church to accept given the social issues of the day. Here, the desire of the Black members to leave the church also likely worked in their favor. If they had pushed for the ordination of Black elders within First Baptist Church, it would have likely been a very contentious issue, but the fact that these African American elders would be in their own church meant that they would not be exercising authority over white members even if they were theoretically equal to white leaders. The desire to leave may then have made the acceptance of Black ordinations more palatable for some white Baptists.

Ultimately, as with most decisions made by a body of people, the reasons for each person’s vote likely varied. Even the motivations within an individual may have been mixed. That said, it is clear that both Joseph Warren Speight and Pastor R.C. Burleson supported the request of the African American community. The minutes directly state that Speight reported on

⁶⁶ Jones, *The Religious Instruction*, 134-135.

the issue during the conference.⁶⁷ Given his stature, this report must have been favorable, or the initiative would not have succeeded. Burleson later ordained Stephen Cobb to the ministry so his position is also in little doubt.⁶⁸ Whatever the motives, the white church conference offered both the letters of dismissals and the promise of ordinations.

With letters of dismissal in hand, the African American former members of First Baptist Church were ready to form a new independent congregation. This new church was not entirely new though, as it was the culmination of years of development within First Baptist Church. Now separate, it had to embark on its own journey with new members and logistical hurdles.

On June 10, 1866, the new church met for the first time with eighteen members who had all been part of First Baptist Church.⁶⁹ This group included Stephen Cobb as well as fellow exhorter Ben Crain and deacon Henry Burke. The original membership further consisted of eight women and seven other men.⁷⁰ Interestingly, this number was relatively small considering that the total number of Black members of First Baptist Church had exceeded fifty in 1860 and had only grown over the war years.⁷¹ While it is true that some of the Black members of the church had already requested letters in the year between the end of the Civil War and the formation of the new church, this would seem to leave a sizable number of African Americans on the roster of First Baptist Church.

The answer to this discrepancy is very interesting. When the church conference dismissed the African American members, it not only dismissed the specific people who started

⁶⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 166.

⁶⁸ History of New Hope, 2.

⁶⁹ New Hope Anniversary Booklet, 3.

⁷⁰ History of New Hope, 1.

⁷¹ *Statistics of First Baptist Church, at Waco, from May 31, 1851, to August 13, 1876.*

the new church, but all the African Americans.⁷² The letter of dismissal was a blanket letter which included all the Black members of the church. This is evident in the roster book for First Baptist Church. Under the dismissal column for every African American member who was still in the church as of June 1866, it reads “dismissed to form colored church B, 166.”⁷³ This means that after that action, there were no Black members on the roll of First Baptist Church. This fact is further supported by the fact that the minute book for First Baptist never mentions another African American service.⁷⁴

This leads to the natural inquiry about what happened to the African American members who did not join the new African American congregation. Unfortunately, it is impossible to be certain based on extant documents, but a few options are possible. As the new African American church was the only congregation of its type in the area (and one of only a couple in the entire state) it is quite likely that several people who are not listed in the histories for the new church joined shortly after it formed. In fact, the extant histories appear to list the men and women who signed the petition to form a new church as the charter members, so it is possible that many who did not sign that document joined almost immediately.⁷⁵

African Americans who did not join the new church may have taken several different paths. Some could have left the area. Indeed, it is likely that some already had left before the creation of the new church. Others could have joined with African American Methodists who were at the time (or slightly later) forming their own independent congregation.⁷⁶ This church

⁷² First Baptist, Roster Book.

⁷³ First Baptist, Roster Book.

⁷⁴ First Baptist, Minute Book B; First Baptist, Minute Book C.

⁷⁵ History of New Hope, 1.

⁷⁶ History of New Hope, 3-4.

would have maintained differing doctrines than the Baptist church, but not all the former First Baptist members may have been determined to remain Baptists. It is also possible that some of the former members simply stopped attending services. This is unlikely however given the process of membership and the commitment required to become a member of a Baptist Church in the 1860s.⁷⁷ Falling away may have been the story of some, but by no means was it the likely path of most of the former members of First Baptist.

With the eighteen and possibly more original members in place, they could embark on the process of forming the new church. The members of the new African American church took their Baptist doctrines and practices seriously; therefore, they followed the standard procedures necessary to create a missionary Baptist Church.⁷⁸ This involved impaneling a board of Baptist elders (which they called a presbytery) to officially commission the new church and ordain its leaders.⁷⁹ This group included Pastor Rufus C. Burleson, former pastor S. G. O'Bryan, and Richard B. Burleson.⁸⁰ At the organizational meeting on June 10, the new church elected men to serve as deacons. As Henry Burke had already been ordained as a deacon, the congregation chose him along with three other men who were ordained on that day.⁸¹

It was also on June 10, 1866, that the members of the new church considered a name for the new congregation. According to the church histories, Stephen Cobb suggested the name New Hope which was accepted by all in attendance.⁸² This truly was an excellent name, because it concisely described the new church. At the time these men and women formed the church,

⁷⁷ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 9-13; Wills, *Democratic Religion*.

⁷⁸ First Baptist, Minute Book A, 1-2; Baker, *Blossoming in the Desert*.

⁷⁹ History of New Hope, 2.

⁸⁰ History of New Hope, 2.

⁸¹ New Hope Anniversary Booklet, 3.

⁸² New Hope Anniversary Booklet, 3; History of New Hope, 1.

everything was new for the African American community and there was great hope for the future. It does not appear that anyone questioned the name or offered other suggestions. In addition to the fittingness of the name itself, it is also appropriate that Stephen Cobb was the one who named the new congregation, given his importance at that moment and the role that he would have moving forward.

Another important step in setting up the new church was establishing the rules and laws of the new congregation. The original minute book for New Hope is no longer available, but a minute book does exist which dates to 1876.⁸³ Although a decade after the founding of the church, the beginning of this book includes the Laws and Rules of New Hope. In comparison to the founding documents of First Baptists Church, these rules are shorter. They included six articles that define membership within the church and describe the nature of the church as a Baptist church.⁸⁴ There is also a separate statement on the duties of the pastor of the church which is also very similar to that of First Baptist Church.⁸⁵

With everything else in place, it was necessary to call a pastor for New Hope. This was potentially a problem for although both Stephen Cobb and Ben Crain had been confirmed as exhorters, no member of the new church had been fully ordained to the ministry by sitting Baptist elders.⁸⁶ To rectify this the members of New Hope requested the board of elders who were assisting in the creation of the new church to ordain both men to the ministry. This process

⁸³ New Hope, Minute Book.

⁸⁴ New Hope, Minute Book, 3.

⁸⁵ New Hope, Minute Book, 4.

⁸⁶ First Baptist, Minute Book B, 163.

involved not just an ordination ceremony, but a preliminary examination by the empaneled presbytery.⁸⁷ In other words, ordination was not guaranteed.

On June 24, 1866, the elders examined both men to ascertain whether they should be ordained. This questioning focused on the examinees' "learning and knowledge of scripture."⁸⁸ In addition to general knowledge of the Bible, the elders undoubtedly also raised questions of theology and Baptist doctrine. They took this process as seriously as they would for any candidate for ordination. This process was so important to the Baptists of that era, because if ordained, the new ministers would hold all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of eldership in the Baptist church. In addition to serving as pastor, they could then sit on church councils. In theory and likely practice as well, they would be equal to any other Baptist elder. After the examination, both men were confirmed for ordination in a service that took place the same day and included a prayer from R.B. Burleson, a sermon from R.C. Burleson, and a ministerial charge from S.G. O'Bryan.⁸⁹ With the conclusion of the ordination, New Hope had two fully ordained ministers and a choice of who to call as the pastor of the church.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the congregation called Stephen Cobb to be its pastor.⁹⁰ Cobb was a logical choice as he had already preached to the African American community within First Baptist and held the respect of both Black and white Baptists within Waco. Although there were two potential candidates, a church history of New Hope indicates that Cobb was the sole nominee and elected unanimously.⁹¹ Cobb immediately accepted and took up his new post. As

⁸⁷ History of New Hope, 2.

⁸⁸ History of New Hope, 2.

⁸⁹ History of New Hope, 2-3.

⁹⁰ New Hope Anniversary Booklet, 3; History of New Hope, 3.

⁹¹ History of New Hope, 3.

the pastor, he was expected to preach, preside over church meetings, and provide leadership and vision for the congregation.

One of Cobb's first acts as Pastor of New Hope Baptist Church was his move to create a committee to find a new place to worship separate from First Baptist Church.⁹² The early church history of New Hope states that Cobb, "did not feel like he would be doing right to continue to trespass upon our white brethren any longer."⁹³ It does not appear from any of the contemporary documents that leadership from First Baptist pressured New Hope to find its own place to worship, but doing so would be advantageous for several reasons. First, as long as New Hope worshiped in the actual building of First Baptist, it would have to work around the meeting times of the parent church. This meant that Saturdays and Sunday mornings would not be available. Second, having a separate facility would further create a distinct identity for New Hope both in the minds of the Baptists of the area and the people at large. Third, if New Hope had a facility of its own, then it could use that facility for purposes other than worship services. The chief potential use of a meeting house of course would be to serve as a school, which was rapidly becoming a priority for the African Americans of Waco and across the South.

With Shed Willis (a long-time member of First Baptist Church and founding member of New Hope) in the lead, the committee secured an old foundry building on the corner of Jefferson Avenue and Sixth Street to serve as their first meeting house.⁹⁴ Worship services appear to have begun taking place in the location as early as July. One church history says of the original place of worship, "The uncomely quarters in this dilapidated shack, which bore the marks of age and

⁹² History of New Hope, 3.

⁹³ History of New Hope, 3.

⁹⁴ History of New Hope, 3; New Hope Anniversary Booklet, 3.

scars of service, but with unfettered liberty, were more inviting than cushioned pews and frescoed walls.”⁹⁵ Despite the poor condition of the building, it served as the home of New Hope. Within a year, the building was also serving as a school, but it proved inadequate for that task.

The need for a better building for both the church and school prompted the people of New Hope to look for a better situation. They had already formed a committee led by Shed Willis to raise funds for a new building as early as September 1866 but raising funds had been difficult.⁹⁶ With the added pressure of housing a school, the leadership of New Hope reached out to the African American Methodists who at the time were still worshipping in the building of First Methodist Church.⁹⁷ Together, they decided to pool their resources and build a Union Building over which they would share custody.⁹⁸ This new building would be larger than New Hope’s original quarters and serve much better as a school. With the completion of the new building, New Hope Baptist Church’s position was solidified within the community. While maintaining ties to First Baptist Church, the members of the congregation had also formed new cross denominational ties with other African American Christians of the area. By 1869, they were poised to be a central part of Waco in the years and decades to come.

⁹⁵ New Hope Anniversary Booklet, 3.

⁹⁶ History of New Hope, 3.

⁹⁷ History of New Hope, 3-4; New Hope Anniversary Booklet, 3.

⁹⁸ History of New Hope, 4; New Hope Anniversary Booklet, 3.

Conclusion

Looking at the Past, Looking to the Future

As the calendar progressed from the 1860s to the 1870s, both New Hope Baptist Church and First Baptist Church of Waco continued to grow and develop. In the early years after the separation, the churches remained relatively close particularly during the tenure of Steven Cobb, but as the years went by, the churches drifted apart even as they both grew and became central parts of the Waco community. By the end of the 1870s the pastorships of both Cobb and Burleson came to an end.¹ Although able men filled the pulpits of both churches in the succeeding years (most notably B.H. Carroll in the case of First Baptist and Dr. J. Newton Jenkins in New Hope), they did not possess the shared history or relationship of Cobb and Burleson. This lack of personal connection combined with continued sociocultural pressure played a role in the diverging trajectories of the two churches.

Even as they shifted away from each other both churches continued to serve the community of Waco in a variety of ways. Most notably, First Baptist continued to be a significant leader among Baptists in the state of Texas. In fact, a strong case can be made that during the early part of the twentieth century First Baptist Church of Waco was the most important Baptist Church in the state until its eclipse by First Baptist Church of Dallas. In addition to sponsoring New Hope Baptist Church, First Baptists also assisted in the creation of three other missionary Baptist churches.² For its part, New Hope was one of the earliest African

¹ Pastors, Rufus C. Burleson, <http://fbcwaco.org/pastors/rufus-c-burleson/>; New Hope Anniversary Booklet, 2.

² Our History, <http://fbcwaco.org/about-us/our-history/>.

American Baptist churches in the state and served as a model for other churches which came after it. Moreover, alongside the African American Methodist Church, New Hope became one of the most important institutions in the black community in Waco.

New Hope and First Baptist were also both involved in education. New Hope and its facilities assisted in education from its earliest days and continued to do so into the twentieth century. In addition to helping with local elementary education, it held a robust Sunday school program which in that era offered more comprehensive education than Sunday school programs of the latter half of the twentieth century. First Baptist also developed a Sunday school curriculum and maintained close ties to Waco College, which eventually merged with Baylor College and became Baylor University.³ The links to Baylor not only helped Baylor develop, but solidified the importance of First Baptist Church. Although in the early years, First Baptist had much stronger ties to Baylor, eventually New Hope formed links to Baylor as well when a member of the church named Vivienne Malone-Mayes became the first African American professor at the University.⁴

New Hope gained recognition in another major area as well: music. Over the course of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, New Hope developed a widely known and celebrated music program. This effort was headed by Dr. G.S. Conner and his wife Mattie Conner.⁵ By the early 1900s, they led an adult choir of at least forty members as well as an orchestra and children's programs. Although many talented people were part of this program,

³ William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. Reprint. (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1881), 1197.

⁴ Malone-Mayes, Vivienne Lucille, *Handbook of Texas*, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/malone-mayes-vivienne-lucille>.

⁵ New Hope Baptist Church, *Waco History*, <https://wacohistory.org/items/show/27?tour=1&index=2>.

the most famous is Jules Bledsoe who grew up in the church and went on to become an internationally recognized opera singer.⁶

As time passed, both churches outgrew their mid-nineteenth century buildings and sought new larger edifices. First Baptist built a large sanctuary in 1907 at the corner of Fifth Street and Webster Avenue.⁷ This became the home of the church throughout the twentieth century and continues to serve the church today. Some consider the sanctuary of First Baptist Church to be the most beautiful in the city. New Hope moved several times in the late 1800s before building its own permanent home at the corner of Sixth Street and Marlborough Avenue.⁸ Today, both churches continue to serve the Waco community as they have done for more than a century and a half, but even as their stories continue, their early history has much to teach to anyone who would take the time to listen.

The importance of the story of New Hope is tied directly to the themes that it brings to light. Although many themes could be found in the story of the development and foundation of New Hope, two are particularly compelling: the issue of race in the church and the issue of the church's interaction with the wider community. Not only are these central themes of the story of New Hope, but they are also issues that still resonate today.

The most central theme of the story of the creation of New Hope is interaction between race and religion. As has been demonstrated, First Baptist and the Baptists in general were some of the most independent and egalitarian of all Christians of the Antebellum and Civil War eras.

⁶ Bledsoe, Julius Lorenzo Cobb, Handbook of Texas, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/bledsoe-julius-lorenzo-cobb>.

⁷ Our History, <http://fbcwaco.org/about-us/our-history/>.

⁸ New Hope Baptist Church, Waco History, <https://wacohistory.org/items/show/27?tour=1&index=2>.

Despite their religious tenets they lived in a world of racism and slavery. The early story of First Baptist is the story of how both Black and white members navigated this inherent contradiction. Ultimately the white portion of the church (consciously or not) attempted to find compromise between their faith and the world in which they lived. While this may have worked for a time, it also opened the door for African American members to question that compromise and push for more authority within the church.

In the immediate post war world, there was hope that the issue of race might be solved, but the succeeding years demonstrated that it would not be. In fact, the issue of racism both inside and outside of the church is still present in American society today. This fact is demonstrated by the reality that one of the most segregated times in modern America is Sunday morning. This is not to say that most modern American Christians are racists in the sense that they hate people who do not share their skin color, but it illustrates that the effects and scars of centuries of slavery and discrimination are still present and still affect the world even at the unconscious level. Just as the members of First Baptist did, modern Christians both white and Black still wrestle with the issue of racism and its interaction with religion.

Like residents in Waco, many modern Christians still make compromises between the ideals of their faith and the reality of the world around them. Of course, this is not just true of the issue of racism but a myriad of other issues as well. Many Christians in the modern world still make compromises with culture. While those compromises may be different, they are as present in the church today as they were in the 1850s and indeed as they have been throughout the history of the Church. Even today, it is easy to be blind to the compromises made in modern society.

A second major theme of the story of New Hope's development within First Baptist is that the outside world can place tremendous pressure on the church. In the story of First Baptist, this is most clearly seen during the war years when outside pressure from the city government coerced changes in the internal processes within the church. More pervasively, the culture of the South constantly influenced the actions and attitudes of people within the church.

This issue is also very present today, city and local governments still put pressure on local churches to influence the operations of the church. Just like in the case of First Baptist, modern Christians still must consider how to respond to the demands of local government. More pervasive than government influence is the influence of culture and society. The church in every era has had to deal with the culture in which it exists, and today is no different. Just as the people of First Baptist tried to maintain their faith amid their culture, modern Christians do the same. The compromises that modern Christians make may be very different from the compromises of Christians in Antebellum Waco, but they are ever much as present.

The problem of organizations dealing with outside pressure is not unique to the church. All organizations from business, to governments, to social clubs exist within an outside community. Over time, pressures from the outside community and society can and do shift organizations for better or worse. This fact is most clearly viewed in the realm of government. As American society has shifted and developed, the government has changed alongside it. In a very small amount of time, it may be difficult to see this change, but over the course of many years, it becomes much more obvious. This change may be good or bad, but the fact that it does occur is obvious.

The themes of New Hope's story provide lessons that can help modern people navigate the similar issues that they face today. As churches and other organizations face pressure from

the wider community, it is critical to recognize that pressure and influence. Many people in the modern world seem not even to recognize the influences that shape the way they think and act. To the credit of the people in First Baptist, they seem to have recognized the inherent contradictions in the way that they lived out their faith, but that recognition was not enough to overcome the influence of their time and place.

As influence is recognized, it must be processed and answered. Of course, the three main ways to deal with new influences are to accept them, compromise with them, or resist them. Therefore, recognizing influences is so critical, because without recognition, the choice is not present, and acceptance or compromise will almost always result. With recognition, a choice is possible. The people of First Baptist responded to the world around them with compromise. It is easy in hindsight to be critical of the choices of people of the past, but it is not as easy amid the pressure. Compromise is likely the most common response even today. One key lesson of First Baptist Church is to recognize pressure and respond in the best manner. It takes great courage to resist pressure from the world, but it is often the right response. Churches, governments, and organizations are built on values and ideals. If those ideals are compromised, so is the organization.

A second major lesson of the story of New Hope is that progress toward justice can be made in society even amidst great injustice. Neither the African American members nor the white congregants of First Baptist Church could have foreseen the creation of an independent African American church in the middle of the 1850s, but history demonstrates that it did eventually happen. Partly, this outcome was enabled by events at the national level, but it also occurred because of the actions of people in the local community. As people in First Baptist

moved forward, they created the foundation for the church that would form in the wake of the Civil War. Even if it seems like things will never change or improve, they can.

In the case of First Baptist Church, the African American members worked throughout the 1850s to improve their situation and make gains in their authority in the church. They did this by using the little authority that they had in 1855 to slowly push for more independence and responsibility. Even during the difficult days of the American Civil War, they did not shrink back even as what independence they had was challenged. This positioned them to move toward total independence in the post war years. If they had not worked hard in the midst of inequality, they would not have been ready to move forward when the opportunity presented itself. It is easy to give up in the face of adversity, but this is not the answer. As demonstrated by the members of First Baptist Church, the only way to make progress is to keep moving forward and build on the progress that has already been made no matter how small it might be.

The story of New Hope is not only a story of the African American men and women who formed the church, but also the white members of First Baptist Church. Despite the compromises that they may have made with the culture and society of the antebellum South, it is critical to note that they did support the creation of New Hope even as they had ceded more independence and authority to the Black members of the church in the years before the war. Their actions may have been slow and may not seem laudable to modern Americans, but over time, they did not resist and in many cases even supported the progress being made by the African American members of the Church. The fact that in 1866, Rufus C. Burlison ordained Stephen Cobb to the ministry demonstrates the support that those in positions of privilege can give to those struggling against injustice.

If the story of New Hope provides nothing else, it offers exactly what its name suggests: hope. The name was originally chosen to symbolize the hope of the new congregation. They had made great progress, but still had so much more to do. As they looked to the past, it gave them hope for the future. Hope is ultimately what drove them forward, and it is what can still drive people forward today. Modern Americans must look back to the past at the progress that has been made even as they face the struggles and challenges of the modern world. They must find and hold on to renewed hope that is sorely needed in the world today.

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Teaching Assistant of the Year, Department of History, Texas Christian University, 2019-2020
Phi Alpha Theta, Member, 2019
Golden Key International Honor Society, Member, 2018
History-Political Science Outstanding Senior, LeTourneau University, 2010
University Police Guard of the Year, LeTourneau University, 2010