

One New Book for the Preacher

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Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Virtually all of us are familiar with many of the different strategies that were used during the Civil Rights movement to awaken the conscience of a nation and bring our country a step closer to the “beloved community” that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so eloquently envisioned: the sit-ins, the demonstrations, the boycotts, the “Freedom Riders,” and more. We are also aware of the attempts to counter these efforts through fire hoses, bombings, death threats, imprisonments, and the ever present attempts to associate leaders of the movement with communism. One begins to wonder if there is anything else that can be added to our understanding of that era and even shed light on our continuing work to “let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

In his book, *The Last Segregated Hour*, Stephen R. Haynes helps shed light on one strategy that has received surprisingly little scholarly study. As a professor at Rhodes College in Memphis, he began hearing about “kneel-ins” and the attempts to integrate the last bastion of segregation, the churches. The paucity of historical comment about these actions was particularly surprising, given the centrality of church-based protest in the theory and practice of nonviolent direct action during that time. In Taylor Branch’s exhaustive, nearly 3,000-page, study of America during the “King years,” there is but one single reference to the “kneel-ins.”

Haynes fills in an important gap in understanding the way kneel-ins could traumatize individuals and institutions, but he also takes a longitudinal perspective that examines the effect kneel-ins had on people and institutions in the 1960s and the ways those same people and institutions have changed and at times have sought to repent of their former ways.

After an overview of kneel-ins in various cities throughout the south (Albany, Atlanta, Savannah, Birmingham, and Jackson are but a few), Professor Haynes focuses on specific events in Memphis, Tennessee, and the religious roots of those events. The kneel-ins in Memphis were typical in some ways but unique in others, including their duration (fourteen Sundays over a ten-month period) and the prominent role played by students (white students from Southwestern College, now Rhodes College, and African-American students from Memphis State and LeMoyne College, which is now LeMoyne-Owen College), but also the low profile played by the church’s pastors during the crisis and the church schism that resulted.

In the early months of 1964, these students launched a campaign of church testings, pairing up students of different races to visit both black and white churches. The greatest resistance was found at Second Presbyterian Church, which was well known as the bastion of Presbyterian ecclesiastic conservatism. The church eventually withdrew from the Presbyterian Church (US) over this issue as well others.

The students met a wide variety of responses as they visited the white churches,

but it was at Second that they were greeted week in and week out by deacons and elders standing arm-in-arm to block entrance to the church. The students, always neatly dressed in their “Sunday best,” would kneel, pray, and then find a church where they could worship together. There was never any overt violence, and the movement was slow in getting attention, due largely to the absence of any local press coverage. When a few reports were finally printed, often buried in the back pages, the national press, particularly the denominational magazines, began to take note.

The leaders of Second Presbyterian maintained throughout that the issue was not integration, as some nostalgically looked back on the days when there was a special section of the balcony reserved for “the dignified old darkies in their high hats” who had driven their employers to church (p. 59).

As pressure mounted with no end in sight, pictures of the protesters began to appear in the mailboxes of the parents of Southwestern students. A mother of one of the white students received a letter accompanied by a photo of her son standing in the rain alongside an unidentified young black woman. The response probably was not what the author/photographer expected. She wrote,

I am glad that you sent me the picture of Hayden and his friend attending a church service. This picture will very definitely be one of the most cherished ones in the album. And, I expect he will show it to his children, as they come along, with a degree of justifiable pride. Certainly his father and I are proud of him. Not every young man is so courageously loyal to Christ that he is willing to undergo ridicule, abuse, and insults because of his Christian convictions. (p. 62)

The events had repercussions throughout the denomination. The national leaders of the PC(US) attempted to persuade the session of Second Church to change their policy to no avail, so the Moderator, Felix Gear, took the unprecedented act of moving the 1965 General Assembly meeting from Second Church to the denomination’s conference center in Montreat, North Carolina. Particularly ironic is the fact that Dr. Gear was a former pastor of Second!

What makes this book so readable is the extensive research Haynes shared not only with written documents and press accounts, but the many personal interviews with a wide variety of people who were involved in one way or another with the kneel-ins: the students themselves, church leaders who barred the doors, members of Second who were either unaware of the protests or were against the official stand of the church, students at Southwestern who were not involved, and others. He not only sheds light on their thoughts then, but how they viewed their actions now.

Haynes could have stopped there, but he goes on to describe the lingering effects of the kneel-ins within the church in Memphis. Several years later, under the continued leadership of Jeb Russell, the pastor of Second, the congregation finally voted to limit the terms of active elders, thus enabling fresh voices to be heard so that the church eventually opened the doors in 1966 to all who came to worship. This led to a schism in the congregation, and those who still clung to the old policies broke off and started a new Presbyterian church, which is now part of the Presbyterian Church in America. He also documents efforts of the current leadership to repent of their past, getting to the point more recently of inviting African-Americans who had not

been able to worship forty years ago to a service of reconciliation. He found little interest on the part of those who had been discriminated against to be a part of such a service, including one who stated that she still feels ill when she drives past the church.

Several final observations are in order. First, in this day of church schisms over issues of “biblical authority” or “the centrality of Jesus Christ,” there was virtually no biblical or theological justification that church leaders used to support their positions. Appeals were simply made to “keeping the peace,” “maintaining our way of life,” or “preserving the historical independence of the church.” Many stated that the issue wasn’t race, but rather opening the doors to the church for all who were “genuinely interested in worshipping,” and not “agitating.” When one says, “It’s not about race,” we can be pretty sure it’s about race.

Second, I have a whole new set of spiritual heroes to be thankful for, many of whom are good friends that I had no idea were so courageous during the kneel-ins. (I spent as much time in the footnotes as I did on the body of the text!) They were not met with fire hoses and dogs; they were not imprisoned (though that was a possibility). They did, however, take significant risks on behalf of justice, sometimes without their parents’ support, when they very easily could have retreated into their studies at a prestigious college.

Finally, whereas Second Church is to be commended for recent attempts to become more involved in the racial and economic needs of the city (most recently named the poorest city in the nation), one cannot help but notice that the same theology and world-view that led church leaders to bar African-Americans from worship exists today. Second does not have women in positions of pastoral or sessional leadership. One cannot be a gay person in a relationship and be a member of the church. The issues are different, but on a deeper level, they are the same.

It would be easy to read this excellent book with a certain condescension, shocked at how “decent church-going people” could have possibly barred anyone from worshipping the God who loved the world so much that the Son was sent to save, not to condemn. But, as Robert Penn Warren once said, “The past is always a rebuke to the present.” How do we apply the lessons of history to the present? How might our generation be viewed fifty years from now? Anyone interested in these questions and concerned about living out the Gospel with courage and conviction ought to read this book.