

Southern White Ministers and the Civil Rights Movement

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Review

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Lechtreck, Elaine Allen. *Southern White Ministers and the Civil Rights Movement*. University Press of Mississippi, \$90.00 ISBN 9781496817532

Each year brings an avalanche of new studies devoted to the civil rights struggle. The white southern response to the civil rights crusade of the 1950s and 1960s, once a scarcely considered subject, is receiving greater scholarly focus as part of this publication wave. Despite the ever-expanding corpus devoted to the movement considerable gaps exist in the historiography. Far less attention has been given to those white southerners, who risked their professions and sometimes their lives, to challenge the regional status quo. These unsung heroes of the civil rights fight are the subject of retired history teacher Elaine Lechtreck's engaging work, *White Ministers and the Civil Rights Movement*.

Lechtreck's study focuses primarily on ministers from mainline Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian congregations who confronted, in varying ways, racial injustice from the 1960s to the 1980s. Her study illustrates the importance of perspective when examining twentieth century civil rights battles. Throughout, she seeks to uncover the role of the white southern clergy in the tumultuous civil rights era, as well as the factors that shaped individual responses to the perceived challenges. What she unveils is that ministers who preached before all white churches were rarely found in the front lines of civil rights protest efforts. Instead those who adopted an "activist" tone, relative to that expressed by the majority of their peers, did things such as urge their congregations to consider civil rights in the context of Christian teachings, lent their verbal support to local black activists, and periodically signed petitions requesting change. Very few took the ultimate step and directly protested segregation in public demonstrations. According to Lechtreck, their decision making in these cases proved a simple enough process. Had they taken the next step and embraced physical activism their careers would have been jeopardized. Their actions, therefore, must be viewed in the context of their

times. White southern ministers were not twenty-first century heroes who risked everything to fight injustice; they were individuals of great influence in southern communities who felt moved by their faith to resist regional racial norms in more understated ways. Despite their tempered response to racial troubles, they, according to Lechtreck, were brave for even hinting at support for change in the 1960s South. The author is less convincing in demonstrating the impact, if any, these ministers had in real world terms. Aside from conjecture that by doing something they awakened members of their congregations to the injustice around them and provided moral support to African Americans pushing for change, Lechtreck provides little tangible evidence that ministerial action prompted meaningful reform. She chronicles their thoughts and deeds without fully exploring how, or even if, their actions bore fruit.

Lechtreck's account really shines in its efforts to debunk the myth of the monolithic South. Her book underscores several elementary, but critically important considerations often neglected by scholars, including recognition that not all white southerners supported segregation and not all southern states were the same when it came to race relations. Lechtreck effectively demonstrates that white ministers in more progressive locations such as Chapel Hill, North Carolina or those on the periphery of the South such as Lexington, Kentucky were freer to express their discontent with Jim Crow than were ministers in deep southern locations such as Selma, Alabama or Jackson, Mississippi. Of those ministers moved by the civil rights fight (the author provides no sense of how large a percentage of the whole this group represents), most operated in a controlled fashion by challenging the worldview of their faithful in a manner that did not immediately lead to their ouster. Her research does indicate, however, that ministers who adopted an activist position out of step with their congregation's views were generally relocated far sooner than those who operated firmly within regional racial orthodoxy. Job security in most congregations meant towing the line when it came to segregation. Lechtreck's work becomes disjointed in latter chapters which examine events in the late 1960s-1980s when non-violent protests gave way to the Black Power movement and the fight to end segregation shifted toward finding ways to reconcile the disparate racial threads of southern Christendom. The narrative suffers when the author analyzes southern ministers in the context of the personal day-to-day racism that persisted in the region after the demise of de jure segregation. Ministers confronting injustice in this milieu faced fewer overt threats to their livelihoods than did those who preached tolerance in the age of Jim Crow, yet Lechtreck—in sharp contrast to her nuanced approach to

ministerial challenges to segregation—tends to lump the actions of all white ministers across the South from the mid-1960s-1980s in the same box without fully accounting for changes across time and place.

Lechtrek performs a great service in introducing readers to individuals such as W.W. Finlator, Charles M. Jones, Al Price, and an array of other southern ministers who tried to shepherd their congregations toward accepting an integrated future. The extensive photo-insert included in the book offers readers the chance to connect the names with the faces of these clerical activists. Lechtrek's work reminds readers how important faith has been in American history. The civil rights story is hard to imagine without the powerful appeal of Christian ministers who exhorted their congregations to challenge oppression even as others used their pulpits to validate the status quo. Lechtrek enlightens by highlighting a group of white preachers who wanted to see the South change, but who stopped short of using their privileged status in southern communities to promote revolutionary action. These ministers often first had to experience their own personal transformation on matters of race before they either tepidly or more boldly expressed their support for altering regional norms. Contemporary observers might view the actions of Lechtrek's ministers as something less than impressive. Indeed, a strong case could be made that Dr. Martin Luther King's scathing indictment of southern religious leaders in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" could just as easily have been applied to much of the study group included in this book because they did not do enough in the face of injustice. Lechtrek confronts this critique by illustrating the actions of a group of men who risked their careers in order to voice discontent with the injustice they saw around them. In the modern age where instant gratification is the norm, it is worthwhile to remember that long journeys begins with one step. Lechtrek's ministers helped the region commence the voyage toward a more integrated future by recognizing that things needed to change and, in doing so, shaped racial dialogue in the South for decades to come.

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