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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Baptist Identity and Elusive Interracialism in the Segregated South: D. V. Jemison, E. P. Alldredge, and the Work of a Black Baptist Seminary

Daniel R. Bare

Department of Global Languages and Cultures, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA
Email: drbare84@tamu.edu

Abstract

American Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS), founded as a black Baptist school in 1924, sprung from an unusual partnership between black and white Baptists in the Jim Crow South. The black National Baptist Convention (NBC) and white Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) jointly funded and governed the Nashville seminary, emphasizing from the outset the strength of their common Baptist identity, though persistent frictions reared up with regularity. The relationship between two leaders involved with ABTS in the mid-twentieth century – National Baptist David V. Jemison and Southern Baptist Eugene P. Alldredge – offers an intriguing lens for viewing the hopes and pitfalls that attended Baptist interracialism in the segregated South. Their correspondence in the 1940s reveals a growing friendship and fellowship as they collaborated in seminary work and bonded over their likeminded Baptist convictions, followed by an abrupt rift after Alldredge's paternalistic meddling in NBC politics led Jemison to defend black Baptist autonomy. Thus, the Jemison–Alldredge relationship poignantly illustrates two conflicting realities facing such attempts at Baptist interracialism: Baptist identity did offer a legitimate nexus for interracial fellowship, yet the racial hierarchy and prejudices of a segregated society also circumscribed those efforts, as black Baptists walked a tightrope between assuaging white concerns and maintaining their own independence.

Keywords: Baptist; education; Jim Crow; interracialism; American Baptist Theological Seminary; David Jemison; Eugene Alldredge

I. Introduction

On August 18, 1945, less than a week after "Victory over Japan Day" had sparked celebrations across the globe, Reverend David V. Jemison settled into his office at Selma, Alabama's Tabernacle Baptist Church with concerns less global in nature weighing on his mind. As the president of the National Baptist Convention (NBC) – one of the largest and most influential African American denominations in the country – Jemison was tasked with not only the health and stability of his local congregation but also of the entire

convention. Central to this task, he believed, was the need to provide theological training and education for young, black Baptist ministers in the South, and so he settled behind his desk ready to continue his correspondence on issues confronting the American Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) – the denomination's theological school in Nashville. On this day, Jemison put ink to paper to connect with a recent friend and one of the most stalwart supporters of the seminary, and so before even getting into the specifics of funding and administrative oversight, he decided to strike a chord of personal thanks and affection. "Words are inadequate to express to you … my profound appreciation and gratitude for … help[ing] us in our struggle to educate the ministry." Jemison's heart was "overwhelmed with gratitude and appreciation" to have a colleague so supportive of the "welfare and advancement" of the black Baptist ministry, and Jemison hoped that this educational endeavor might even hasten the day when all Christian hearts would be rid of "racial prejudice and denominational envy and strife."[1] Who was this steadfast supporter of the National Baptist Seminary? None other than Eugene Perry Alldredge, a white Baptist minister in Nashville and a longtime member of the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC's) administrative leadership.

As black Baptists of the early and mid-twentieth century navigated an American South whose structure was, as W. E. B. Du Bois famously predicted, inextricably tied to the problem of the color line, they drew on a theological heritage that entailed both common roots and historical fractures with their white Baptist counterparts. Though Baptists in America had begun as a fringe colonial minority, by the nineteenth century they had grown to occupy a space in the American religious mainstream; Baptist churches in the slaveholding South commonly included slaves as active church members who listened to the same preaching, practiced in the same rituals, and imbibed the same doctrine as white members – offering, in the words of historian John Boles, a "measure of spiritual equality."[2] Yet, whatever "spiritual equality" might have been afforded black members, it paled in the face of enslavement and the strict hierarchy of racial value that ordered society at large. Naturally, then, in the wake of emancipation, black Baptists began quickly to form their own local churches and denominational bodies – institutions that allowed them religious platforms to prophetically challenge societal injustice and racism, even as many of their white counterparts clung to visions of racial superiority.[3] As a result, black and white Baptists advanced into the twentieth century as distinctly segregated cohorts, despite many commonalities of worship, doctrine, and church structure born of their shared theological heritage.

In 1895, three smaller entities united to form the nation's largest black Baptist denomination, the NBC, which emerged as an act of black Baptist self-determination in response to widespread societal and religious racism.[4] Many black Baptist leaders buoyed hopes of racial advancement through the pursuit of educational achievement,

[1]Jemison to Alldredge, 18 August 1945, Southern Baptist Commission on the American Baptist Seminary Records, AR 630, Box 5, Folder 58, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee (hereafter cited as Commission Records).

[2]John B. Boles, *Black Southerners, 1619–1869* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 158–162. See also Larry M. James, "Biracial Fellowship in Antebellum Baptist Churches," in *Masters & Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740–1870*, ed. John B. Boles (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 37–57.

[3]On divergent theological visions of the South after emancipation, see Elizabeth L. Jemison, *Christian Citizens: Reading the Bible in Black and White in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

[4]For background on the NBC's founding, see James Melvin Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power*, paperback ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004).

with a specific eye toward religious and ministerial education. The very need that had driven the creation of independent black denominations highlighted, in its own turn, the need for black theological education. From at least as early as 1907, the NBC's annual meetings included aspirations to found a "great theological seminary" by and for black Baptists, which might "command the respect and attention" of the nation toward "the Negro Baptist people who, more than any other, deserve national recognition."[5] The denomination finally succeeded in establishing ABTS in 1924 as a school for black Baptist training, but it did not do so single-handedly. Though they envisioned a uniquely National Baptist institution and prized the idea of self-determination, the reality of the segregated South was that black churches, often starting from scratch and constantly facing the endemic disadvantages built into the Jim Crow system, generally lacked the material resources available to their white peers.[6] So, in order to finally secure the resources required to start the school, and also professing their hopes of advancing southern race relations, the NBC founded its seminary in a joint financial and administrative partnership with the white SBC.

From its inception, American Baptist Seminary represented a fascinating arena within which Baptist identity served as a lens for building relationships and judging disputes between the two groups involved in the project. This interracial partnership articulated the ideal of Christian (specifically Baptist) unity and the hope that such common religious identity could bridge racial divides, but at the same time, it also highlighted the constraints, conflicts, and frictions that undercut such idealism thanks to persistent racial prejudices and power struggles.[7] Though modern scholarship on ABTS is surprisingly sparse (to my knowledge, the first extended treatment of the topic in more than half a century was a chapter in my 2021 book *Black Fundamentalists*), it represents a remarkable opportunity to study both the promises and limitations of such Baptist interracialism.[8]

[5]*Journal of the National Baptist Convention 1907* (Nashville, TN: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1908), 35–36. Discussions about a National Baptist seminary recurred virtually every year.

[6]Bobby Lovett makes this case specifically regarding HBCUs in *America's Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Narrative History, 1837–2009* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2015), xii, 47.

[7]This type of interracial cooperation at ABTS entailed an intentional cultivation of fellowship and mutuality across racial divides in pursuit of a common goal and the name of Baptist unity. This falls somewhere between the categories of "racial interchange" and "Christian interracialism" that Harvey lays out in *Freedom's Coming* and aligns fairly well with Sinitiere's definition of Christian interracialism as "constructive social interactions and collaboration across racial and ethnic boundaries – existential engagement inspired by religious ideals and religious teachings – in the interest of undercutting sanctioned divisions." Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 2–3; and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, "Interracialism and American Christianity," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, ed. John Corrigan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 136.

[8]Daniel R. Bare, *Black Fundamentalists: Conservative Christianity and Racial Identity in the Segregation Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), chap. 4. This chapter considers the Baptist identity of ABTS in relation to fundamentalist theology among some influential proponents in both conventions. Before *Black Fundamentalists*, the last extended treatment (to my knowledge) was Ruth Marie Powell's *Lights and Shadows: The Story of the American Baptist Theological Seminary, 1924–1964* (Nashville, TN: s.n., 1964).

Mary Beth Mathews's recently released *Contentious Unions: Black Baptist Schools and White Money in the Jim Crow South* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2024) includes ABTS as one of three comparative case studies. Mathews views it as an essentially adversarial endeavor, positing that Southern Baptists constantly "looked for every and any opportunity to diminish the role" of black participants (44); I contend that a tension between authentic fraternal (Baptist) goodwill and fractious racial prejudice existed within the complex ABTS partnership, illustrated here by Jemison and Alldredge's relationship.

This is particularly true considering the school's unique setup: while the decades following emancipation saw white agencies like the American Baptist Home Mission Society fund numerous black schools premised on white governance and control, ABTS maintained a racially mixed (majority black) governing board and a black seminary president. As a result, especially considering the well-established legacy of segregationism and racism attached to many white Southern Baptists in the twentieth century, ABTS offers a unique window into the curious dynamics of Baptist interracial cooperation.[9]

The correspondence between D. V. Jemison and E. P. Alldredge from 1944 to 1948 gives a fascinating up-close glimpse of these dynamics at work among high-level leaders of both white and black Baptist bodies. Jemison and Alldredge appear to have first connected in January 1944, three years into Jemison's NBC presidency, due to pressing administrative considerations about the seminary's operation. They corresponded with some substantial regularity and familiarity throughout 1944 and 1945, before fading into much stiffer and less frequent communication between 1946 and 1948. It is impossible to know whether these letters, kept by Alldredge as part of the records of his commission, constitute a complete compendium of all their correspondence, but regardless, they do constitute a collection that the Southern Baptist felt important enough to permanently preserve. Moreover, the time-frame of these interactions is notable, since both the SBC and the nation stood on the precipice of enormous changes: the Southern Baptists' flagship seminary in Louisville would begin to desegregate in 1951, and soon thereafter, *Brown v. Board* would deal a nationwide blow to public school segregation in 1954. Thus, the correspondence between Jemison and Alldredge offers an encapsulation of Baptist interracialism at a key moment – grounded in the long history of segregation and racial division, with many sentiments shaped by that legacy, but also on the cusp of radical shifts in the social and racial landscape.

The story conveyed in these letters represents in microcosm some of the intriguing contradictions at work in the cooperative endeavor between white and black Baptists in the Jim Crow South. On the one hand, it illustrates a growing respect and affection between these two men in the first 2 years of their acquaintance, demonstrating the potential for interracial fellowship in service of a mutual cause and grounded in a common Baptist identity.[10] On the other hand, it reveals endemic relational and political strains that circumscribed their potential fellowship or friendship – strains that stemmed especially from the racial prejudices of white Baptists and from conflicting perspectives about the operation of such a religious institution. The mere fact of shared Baptist convictions was no definitive cure-all, considering that black Baptist churches, in the words of historians Thomas Kidd and Barry Hankins, "emerged out of the freedom struggle" as "institutions of African American identity within a society dominated by whites."[11] When conflicts arose about ABTS, be they administrative or theological,

[9]On white Baptists' relationship to southern racial mores, see, for example: Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 117–139, 166–168, 211–227; Thomas S. Kidd, *America's Religious History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 233–235; J. Russell Hawkins, *The Bible Told Them So* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 14–29, 40–41, 159–164; Barry Hankins, *God's Rascal*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2022), 13–15, 65–67, 76–79, 171–172, 184–187; and Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 82–115.

[10]For a similar paradigm, see Edward R. Crowther and Keith Harper, "'A Heart to Heart Talk With You Over This Matter': Richard Henry Boyd, Elias Camp Morris, James Marion Frost, and the Black Baptist Schism of 1915," *History Research* **7**, no. 1 (Jan-Feb 2017): 26–27.

[11]Kidd and Hankins, *Baptists in America*, 165.

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National Baptist leaders like D. V. Jemison found themselves walking a tightrope, needing to carefully calculate their responses to assuage the concerns of their white partners while also attempting to maintain an independent, racially conscious outlook on the school and its telos as a black Baptist institution. As Jemison endeavored to walk that line, the epistolary record suggests that his stand for National Baptist autonomy in the face of Southern Baptist pressure was very likely the shoal upon which his warm and productive fellowship with Alldredge was ultimately dashed. From hopeful promises to dispiriting pitfalls, the relationship between Jemison and Alldredge illustrates the conflicting forces at play in the work of operating ABTS and the elusive interracialism that the participants hoped to find in their common Baptist identity.

II. Cultivating a Baptist Bond

From the very beginning of the partnership, the ABTS project was conceived as a needful *Baptist* venture. The creation of a seminary for training black Baptist ministers in the South was considered by both denominations to be an "exceedingly desirable and expedient" venture – one in which the NBC was ready to "welcome the practical and financial cooperation of other organizations of Baptists who may indicate a desire to share in this important work."[12] Shared theological commitments fueled cooperative efforts between the black and white Baptist conventions, stretching back prior even to the National Baptists' contentious denominational split in 1915, with the school finally opening its doors to students in 1924 after years of planning.[13] This common ground of Baptist conviction was particularly evident in the seminary's 1924 statement of faith, a confessional standard crafted by a racially mixed committee whose chair, incidentally, happened to be E. P. Alldredge.[14] In this role, it is no stretch to see Alldredge as a major player in the seminary's confessional affirmation that Baptist identity was the unifying factor bridging the institutional divides between the SBC and the NBC. Indeed, the confession's explicitly Baptist character on such doctrines as local church autonomy and believer's baptism by immersion, along with its insistent assertion that the Christian gospel transcends "race or color," reinforced this outlook. Beginning each article with the broad, denominationally inclusive statement, "Baptists believe," ABTS's doctrinal confession notably bore substantial congruence with the SBC's own confessional document that would be adopted by the convention the following year, the Baptist Faith and Message.[15]

Not only was the school founded and funded as a joint Baptist effort spanning racial and denominational dividing lines, but ABTS was also designed to ensure shared governance over the operational, educational, and administrative life of the school. The seminary's Holding Board, which controlled the school's property, was populated with a two-to-one Southern Baptist majority, while the larger Board of Directors (alternately called the Governing Board or the Board of Trustees) maintained a two-to-one advantage in favor of National Baptists. In contrast to many other "interracial" endeavors into southern black religious education, which often amounted to a cadre of white teachers and administrators governing a body of black students, ABTS represented something

[12]"Minutes of a Joint Meeting," 18 September 1913, Commission Records, Box 1, Folder 1.

[13]"Negro Theological Education: Southern Baptist Attitudes and Actions, 1913–1938," Commission Records, Box 6, Folder 25; and Powell, *Lights and Shadows*, 13–31.

[14]Alldredge to Ralph W. Riley, 9 April 1949, Commission Records, Box 3, Folder 27.

[15]"Confession of Faith," Commission Records, Box 1, Folder 1; and Bare, *Black Fundamentalists*, 137–141.

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qualitatively different – a project which ensured that both black and white Baptists would have direct financial, administrative, and institutional investment.[16] Moreover, American Baptist's faculty always included black instructors, and its founding documents guaranteed that the school's president must always be selected from among the ranks of the National Baptists.[17] Though financial constraints had caused the NBC to seek a partnership in lieu of complete institutional self-determination, they made sure that the seminary's governance and leadership would reflect its National Baptist provenance and character.

It was, in fact, cogitations on this final topic, the presidential leadership of the school, that spurred the introduction and first epistolary exchanges between E. P. Alldredge and D. V. Jemison in January of 1944. The seminary's president at the time, James M. Nabrit, was completing his eighth year in the position, but his tenure had been plagued from the start by a debilitating spinal injury in 1936, severely limiting his effectiveness and ultimately forcing his retirement in 1944. This state of affairs troubled Alldredge, who had by now spent decades in the task of supporting black Baptist education through ABTS. In twenty years serving the school as a leading member of the Southern Baptists' Commission on ABTS, he had devoted inestimable time to working closely with seminary officials of both races on matters ranging from big-picture architectural planning to the mundane tasks of payroll oversight and dormitory repairs. From this vantage, as someone who had been intimately involved with the school from well before its doors first opened, a sense of urgency had overcome Alldredge in the final years of Nabrit's presidency. By 1943, Alldredge feared that without substantial administrative changes, "we will drift along at the same poor, dying rate."[18]

It was likely Alldredge's discussion on this topic in the fall of 1943 with Arthur Townsend, the longtime secretary of NBC's Publishing Board and the chairman of the ABTS Board of Directors, that led to his first contact with Jemison. Townsend had floated the idea of the Board giving Dr. Nabrit a raise, and Alldredge replied with a detailed list of concerns. While reiterating his high esteem for Dr. Nabrit both as a Christian family man and as "a preacher of marked ability," Alldredge registered several significant criticisms, centered mostly on the topics of administration and student recruitment. Nabrit had been "mostly incapacitated and suffering greatly" throughout his time at ABTS, yet he had neglected to secure a dean who could pick up the slack. Moreover, the seminary was consistently struggling to recruit college-trained students. So deeply did this bother Alldredge that he harbored suspicions that the National Baptist leaders – specifically Townsend, Nabrit, and Jemison – had colluded to funnel college-trained students away from ABTS and into northern seminaries as a covert means of pressuring Southern Baptist seminaries to desegregate. He even wondered whether Jemison and the others had conspired with Noble Beall, a leader in the SBC's Home Mission Board whom Alldredge held in special contempt.[19] Beall's push for southern blacks to attend Northern Baptist

[16]Consider, for instance, Dallas's Southern Bible Institute or Atlanta's Carver Bible Institute. Both were products of unilateral action by white ministers, resulting in overwhelmingly white administration and governance for many years. Michael Cooks, "The History and Future of the Southern Bible Institute," *Christian Higher Education* **9**, no. 2 (2010): 152–153; and Albert G. Miller, "The Construction of a Black Fundamentalist Worldview: The Role of Bible Schools," in *African Americans and the Bible*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Continuum International, 2000), 721–724.

[17]Minutes of Board of Directors, 25 June 1924, Commission Records, Box 1, Folder 1.

[18]Alldredge to E. A. McDowell, 26 April 1943, Commission Records, Box 6, Folder 11.

[19]Alldredge to Townsend, 13 October 1943, Commission Records, Box 7, folder 32.

schools had made him, in Alldredge's mind, "the one man who has done more to kill the [American Baptist] Seminary than any other three."[20]

With all this in mind, it appears that, before ever having any contact with Jemison, Alldredge held a rather suspicious attitude toward the National Baptist president and his posture toward ABTS. This represented rocky terrain for any potential collaborative relationship to begin. Jemison, for his part, also had a keen sense of the potential tensions and pitfalls of collaborating with white partners; in early 1943, he had cast his support behind black labor leader A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement, telling Randolph that every step of black social progress would come through struggle in the face of the "camouflaging and hypocrisy of whites."[21] So, by the beginning of 1944, both Jemison and Alldredge evidently harbored doubts about the commitments and motivations of their cross-denominational counterparts. And although Jemison had succeeded the late Lacey Kirk Williams as the president of NBC back in 1940, inheriting also Williams's position as a member of the ABTS Board of Directors, he had not yet, in his first 3 years, attended a Board meeting or, evidently, met with the seminary's Southern Baptist supporters. It seems quite likely, then, that news of Alldredge's concerns about the administration of ABTS, as well as his doubts about National Baptist leadership's commitment to the seminary, traveled directly from Townsend to Jemison by the end of 1943. This apparently prompted Jemison to reach out for the first time on January 13, 1944, addressing a letter to "E. P. Aldrich" – a common misspelling which Alldredge mentioned in passing and which Jemison took immediate care to correct in subsequent communications.[22]

While Jemison's initial communiqué is not preserved, the substance of Alldredge's lengthy reply indicates that the main topic was the future of the presidency of ABTS. Nabrit had just announced his retirement effective at the advent of the next academic year. So, Jemison sought to consult with Alldredge about the state of the seminary's administration and potential candidates to fill the presidential role. In reply, Alldredge reiterated his personal esteem for Nabrit as among the "finest" and "ablest" men in the South, but whose 8-year administration had "made no real progress." The seminary had "suffered rather seriously" during these years, due not only to Nabrit's crippling injury but also to three "distinct weaknesses" that impeded his effectiveness: poor hiring decisions, indecisiveness in administrative tasks, and a lack of vision for recruitment and growth. As a result, the seminary faced a "very exacting situation," and without more effective leadership, it "will be down and out."[23]

Such uncertainty and instability in presidential leadership was a regrettably familiar position for the school during its first two decades of life. The seminary had struggled to find consistent, effective presidential leadership from the very beginning. Alldredge recounted to Jemison the spate of prior presidents who had failed to live up to expectations – from Sutton E. Griggs, who was unable to move to Nashville after accepting the presidency, to William T. Amiger, who died suddenly after 2 years in the office, to Roy

[20]Alldredge to J. C. Miles, 10 January 1940, Commission Records, Box 6, Folder 11.

So profound was Alldredge's antipathy for Noble Beall that he vituperatively invoked Nazi comparisons, describing Beall's tactics within SBC politics as "high-handed Hitlerism." Alldredge to John Freeman, 19 April 1944, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 19.

[21]Cynthia Taylor, *A. Philip Randolph: The Religious Journey of an African American Labor Leader* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 167.

[22]Alldredge to Jemison, 19 January 1944, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 58.

[23]Ibid.

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Mayfield, who had found himself at odds with the Board of Directors throughout his short tenure. With this in mind, Alldredge pleaded with Jemison to "please … get us a man who is a real executive," a "well-educated, executive minded man" with "plenty of good common sense and judgment" and "a good deal of the 'go-getter' in his makeup."[24]

Evidently, National Baptists had already floated a potential candidate with whom the Southern Baptist members of the Board had some serious theological qualms: J. Pius Barbour, a National Baptist pastor who had been educated at Crozer Seminary, a Northern Baptist school in Pennsylvania. Alldredge and his Southern Baptist fellows, many of whom tended to hold to a broadly "fundamentalist" brand of conservative theology, worried that Barbour harbored sympathies for the liberal paradigm of theological modernism.[25] As we will see later, Alldredge and Barbour eventually butted heads over issues of modernism and fundamentalism after Barbour went on to become the editor of *The National Baptist Voice*, but in January 1944, there was at most a passing familiarity between the two. Hence, Alldredge laid out his concerns to Jemison and requested his assistance in pointed terms. "Southern Baptists know Crozer Seminary quite well," he noted, "both for its modernism and for its denominational politics—and they do not relish either." However, the white members of the Board "do not know [Barbour] and … will be compelled to take your recommendation. What we would like to know: Is he the best man in your Convention for this place and work?"[26]

Jemison, for his part, did not share Alldredge's anxiety. Barbour's education at Crozer was less a red flag and more a "fine sign of his worthiness" as it demonstrated his initiative and readiness to take advantage of the opportunities before him. The Southern Baptists appeared to worry that Crozer's openness to modernism, beyond just the perceived theological threat it posed for southern conservatives, also paved the way for an ecumenical degradation of Baptist distinctives – especially given Northern Baptists' reticence to bind their convention to a formal Baptist confession of faith.[27] Such suspicions entailed a constellation of regional, theological, and denominational elements: Northern Baptist schools like Crozer would produce graduates who were northern-minded and unresponsive to southern concerns, whose theology was influenced by modernist compromises, and who were, therefore, reluctant to actively promote and defend Baptist particularities amid liberal coalitions. White participants in the ABTS project feared that Barbour might be just such a man. Of course, whites' angst about regional identity and the potential threat posed by northern interests also tended to carry racially charged implications – most notably a desire to preserve the South's racial status quo – which may also have added to Southern Baptists' discomfiture with Barbour and covertly influenced their complaints. However, Jemison's reply sidestepped any such subtext, instead directly addressing the explicit theological and denominational concerns driving Southern Baptist suspicion. Jemison assured Alldredge that he would certainly never recommend a president for the seminary "who in any way was modernistic or laid little stress on the importance of the denominational doctrines as it relates to Baptist particularity in the south. I do not agree with the Northern Baptist idea of denominationalism." As far as his estimation of Barbour in particular, Jemison insisted that "Dr. J. Pius Barbour is not

[24]Ibid.

[25]Regarding connections between fundamentalism and various early ABTS figures (including Alldredge), see Bare, *Black Fundamentalists*, chap. 4.

[26]Alldredge to Jemison, 19 January 1944.

[27]Robert A. Ashworth, "The Fundamentalist Movement among the Baptists," *Journal of Religion* **4**, no. 6 (November 1924): 624–625, 630; and Bare, *Black Fundamentalists*, 139–140.

modernistic," and offered further assurances that "you will also find him straight on denominationalism, following closely the doctrines as taught and exemplified by Jesus Christ."[28]

The emphasis here on *Baptist* particularity demonstrates the theological common ground that served as the foundational point of connection between these two denominational leaders across the racial divide. While other issues illustrated a divergence in outlook – regarding, for instance, the value of northern seminary education, or the relative threat of modernism in denominational life – both men laid a heavy emphasis on the nature of Baptist identity as a locus of their cooperation. Alldredge feared that Crozer (and potentially Barbour) might jeopardize this cooperative enterprise, built on a shared core of Baptist principles, for the sake of northern "denominational politics" that diminished Baptist distinctives. Jemison displayed no such concerns about Crozer or Barbour, but he nevertheless identified proper "denominationalism" – that is, in this context, the Baptist particularities that underpinned the work at ABTS – as of preeminent importance, being in principle the doctrines "taught and exemplified" by Christ himself. Jemison here offered a sentiment that both men would reiterate in their increasingly friendly exchanges over the next 2 years: to be seriously biblical *was in essence* to be Baptist, for the Baptist faith was the very same faith expressly taught by Jesus and his apostles. Baptist identity was no mere accessory, but was foundational to the cooperative interracial work at hand. In this respect, the correspondence between Jemison and Alldredge illustrates a significant dynamic of the ABTS project: though certainly divided by the color line and divergent on some ecclesiastical issues, these two denominational leaders nevertheless saw themselves as connected, in quite a meaningful sense, by their identity as Baptists in the American South.

Their open exchange regarding Nabrit and Barbour, beyond the simple nuts and bolts of the situation, also opened the door for the two men to assess and measure one another as denominational leaders. Though never having met in person, their common goals for the seminary and their shared emphasis on strength and decisiveness as necessary leadership traits elicited a growing sense of respect during the early months of 1944. Responding to Alldredge's open articulation of his concerns about the seminary's predicament, Jemison perceived an unusual forthrightness in thought and speech that he appreciated in a co-laborer. Jemison gauged Alldredge to be both candid and largely accurate in his assessment of Nabrit, agreeing that the outgoing president was "intellectually qualified" but "not a man of vision." From his long experience in National Baptist politics, Jemison also drew on his firsthand knowledge of the school's previous presidents to affirm Alldredge's evaluations as fair, frank, and trustworthy. From this vantage, Alldredge's frankness stood out as a sign of high character and quality leadership: "I want to thank you for your frank expression in your letter to me… . I like frank expressions, because anyone who evades rendering decisions when decisions are needed to be made is morally weak and intellectually unprepared for high and qualified leadership."[29]

The sentiment was reciprocated. Reflecting on the massive task that would face the seminary's next president, Alldredge told Jemison that such a burden was nearly insurmountable unless "you and some others of the great leaders among your people" come alongside in pursuit of their shared hope to "start a new day indeed in this Seminary." In

[28]Jemison to Alldredge, 22 January 1944, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 58.
[29]Ibid.

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response, Jemison made a point to reaffirm his appreciation for Alldredge's work and character: "I think more of you today than I ever did because of the fearless expression of the truth as it is. In my opinion you are a great character … and a conscientious Christian." In subsequent exchanges, Jemison lauded Alldredge's candor and willingness to honestly assess the facts – traits that he repeatedly characterized with the term "frank expression." For instance, in early February, Jemison again wrote to thank Alldredge for his "frank expression" about the school's challenges, adding that, "the truth only will stand and any man who has the courage to tell the truth is a friend of God and humanity." Both Jemison and Alldredge viewed religious leadership as properly expressed through traits like frankness and decisiveness, which offered a natural foundation for their cooperative work.[30]

Throughout this correspondence in January and February 1944, Jemison and Alldredge likewise came to recognize one another as potential allies regarding the immediate operational goals of ABTS. Both men repeatedly affirmed their mutual interest in pressing Dr. Nabrit to relinquish his position in June rather than September; it made no sense, they agreed, for Nabrit to remain as a lame duck administrator until the fall semester. Going a step beyond Alldredge's suggestion that the Board "ask" Nabrit to move up his retirement, Jemison assertively countered that "we should not only ask … [but] this should be made imperative." Indeed, the National Baptist president went out of his way to personally ensure this result, seeking to embody the leadership qualities of strength, decisiveness, and frankness that he so valued. In his official capacity, Jemison telegrammed Nabrit that, "On the 1st of June we will expect your activities as president to cease." He furthermore promised Alldredge that the power of his office guaranteed success: "As president of the National Baptist Convention and as a member of the Board of Trustees … I am going to insist that this will be done."[31]

Jemison's invocation of his standing as a Board member marked a new focus on ABTS. As president of his denomination, he had formally been a trustee of the seminary since 1941, but he had never attended a meeting of the Board of Directors. His collaboration with Alldredge ensured that this would change in 1944. Alldredge stridently urged Jemison to attend the meeting himself, as well as to impress its importance on the twenty-three other National Baptist trustees. Jemison committed to doing "whatever it takes" to get his people to a meeting of such "vital importance," including covering all their travel expenses, since "we have lost much time in 'dilli-dalling' with the interest of the [seminary]" in the past. Lamenting his absence from previous meetings, Jemison assured Alldredge that he would be there for this important occasion, insisting that "I must by all means meet you this time."[32]

With the Board meeting just weeks away, Jemison also wrote to inform Alldredge that J. Pius Barbour had withdrawn his name from consideration as the seminary's president, and the NBC had settled on a new candidate: Dr. Ralph W. Riley. Given the concerns that Southern Baptists had raised, Riley was "really a better fit" than Barbour – he was a man "born and reared in the south," a graduate of a southern school (Morehouse College), a

[30]Alldredge to Jemison, 24 January 1944, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 58; Jemison to Alldredge, 7 February 1944, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 58; and Jemison to Alldredge, 12 February 1944, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 58.

[31]Jemison to Alldredge, 22 January 1944; Alldredge to Jemison, 24 January 1944; Jemison to Alldredge, 7 February 1944; and Jemison to Alldredge, 12 February 1944.

[32]Alldredge to Jemison, 11 February 1944, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 58; Jemison to Alldredge, 14 February 1944, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 58; and Jemison to Alldredge, 7 February 1944.

Baptist pastor in a southern state (Alabama), and a person "who knows the southern Negro and the southern White man [and] has the art of approach to both groups." "I am sure," Jemison remarked, "you will like him better than the first man."[33] While remaining implicit, the pressure that Southern Baptists, including Alldredge, had brought to bear on the matter accomplished its purpose in jettisoning Barbour's candidacy and inducing National Baptists to nominate a "better fit" in terms of regional identity, theology, and denominationalism. But now, having hopefully assuaged Southern Baptists' fears about modernism and northern influence, Jemison headed to the Board of Directors meeting with confidence.

Once the Board convened on April 12, 1944, Jemison's confidence was rewarded and his alliance with Alldredge solidified. The National Baptist president was visibly involved from the start, leading the gathered trustees in an opening prayer. The issue of hiring a new seminary president, of course, constituted the main business item that drew Jemison's interest. When the time came, Dr. Nabrit offered his resignation effective June 1 (just as Jemison had insisted), and Dr. Riley was unanimously elected as his successor, meeting with wide approval from both white and black contingents and validating Jemison's work within his denomination on both counts. As the meeting wore on, Jemison and Alldredge joined forces again, this time to halt a proposal to give Nabrit a permanent stipend for "his long and faithful services." The two men had come to agree that, for all Nabrit's personal virtues, his administration had been beset with harmful missteps, and so such a stipend was out of the question given the school's limited finances. Instead, they amended the proposal to offer a more modest one-time gift, in accord with their more tepid view of Nabrit's tenure. Meeting in person for the first time here in April 1944, Alldredge and Jemison stood shoulder to shoulder in their work as trustees.[34]

With the 1944 Board meeting in the rearview, the two Baptist leaders continued to correspond with a great deal of warmth for the better part of the next 2 years – albeit somewhat less urgently, since the impelling need of the seminary's presidential succession had been settled. Often, their exchanges included mutual encouragement in their ministries. In September 1944, Jemison wrote to thank Alldredge for a telegram he had sent during the NBC's annual meeting with "unique and befitting" advice to build up "our racial group and particularly our Baptist group. Men like you do not grow in groves." He earnestly exhorted Alldredge to resist the temptation to retire, calling the 69-year-old Southern Baptist "God's special agent for this work." Alldredge returned the favor, noting the "encouraging reports" of NBC's recent meeting. "Don't be discouraged" in the work of denominational leadership, he urged Jemison. "You and those who think with you … are doing a very great work." Drawing again on their shared ethos of strong, decisive, visionary leadership, Alldredge sought to build up Jemison by affirming his commitment to the "great work" of black Baptists: "Apart from a clear vision of the task, the greatest asset any race leader can have is … the unwillingness to let any obstacle or any enemy stop or discourage him." He concluded by expressing hope that Jemison might join him at the seminary's fall commencement the following week.[35]

[33]Jemison to Alldredge, 21 February 1944, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 58.

[34]Minutes of Board of Directors, 12 April 1944, Commission Records, Box 1, Folder 12.

Chairman Townsend's opening address at the Board meeting closely reflected several concerns that Alldredge and Jemison had discussed at some length, suggesting that Jemison likely made a point to reinforce these issues with his National Baptist constituency.

[35]Jemison to Alldredge, 15 September 1944, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 58; and Alldredge to Jemison, 22 September 1944, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 58.

Most of their missives during 1944–1945 still centered on the work of ABTS, and especially Southern Baptist contributions to it. In late 1944, the SBC pledged $150,000 for new buildings on campus, which struck Jemison as an "almost unspeakable gift." Such sentiments were reinforced publicly in such outlets as the *National Baptist Voice*, which reported on the story in early 1945. The *Voice* highlighted Jemison's declaration that "there exists a group of men in the Southern Baptist Convention who have persistently championed the cause of the Negro," but because they have "in no way sought publicity," they have remained "entirely overlooked in most of the publicity given to Voices of the New South." One name in particular stood out: "Dr. E. P. Alldredge has been untiring in his efforts to bring to the leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention the needs of the Seminary." Apropos of Jemison's public praise, just a matter of weeks later, a hastily sent telegram arrived at Jemison's Selma office with the celebratory news that Alldredge had secured two additional pledges from the SBC's Home Mission Board and Sunday School Board, totaling $85,000. Always looking for ways to increase Southern Baptist investment in the seminary, Alldredge had, in fact, already planned out a long-term building plan with a $375,000 price tag, while also cleverly folding ABTS employees into the SBC's pension plan.[36]

Alldredge's obvious passion and concern for the needs of the seminary, and Jemison's direct care for the operation of the school from his denominational perch, elicited a deep sense of mutual appreciation and fraternity into the fall of 1945. After health troubles caused Jemison to fall behind on news, Alldredge sought to bring him up to speed on some major developments in early August. Notably, this letter addressed Jemison as "Dear Beloved" – a less common form of address that Alldredge sometimes reserved to express a level of personal care and familiarity that rose above most of his multitudinous correspondents. Eager to lift Jemison's spirits, he delivered several pieces of exciting news: the SBC had committed $13,000 for campus upgrades, as well as another $4,800 for scholarships, and the US government's War Production Board had finally (after much lobbying) granted ABTS permission to begin new campus construction. "Now cheer up," Alldredge entreated his friend and coworker, "the best is yet to be. A new and needy day is dawning and we must be ready for it." Jemison responded that "I can hardly refrain from shedding tears" at the extraordinary news – especially the government's permission to begin new construction, which had been secured by Alldredge only after weeks of bureaucratic appeals, a plethora of letters to government officials, and calling in numerous favors and personal connections.[37]

With all these developments in view, Jemison depicted Southern Baptists' financial and institutional support of black Baptist education as a key ingredient for overcoming racial strife in America. Moreover, his relationship with Alldredge represented this hope in microcosm. "Words are inadequate to express to you," he wrote, "my profound appreciation and gratitude" for investing in the ministry of black Baptists. "My heart is overwhelmed with gratitude and appreciation when I think of the help from our white brethren. This is the method of the solution to our problem, if we have one." While this hopeful solution was in part institutional – white Baptists devoting resources to formally strengthen black Baptist churches – it was also a matter of individual hearts. God must

[36]Jemison to Alldredge, 15 September 1944; "Southern Baptists Give Seminary $150,000.00 Building," *National Baptist Voice*, 1 April 1945; Alldredge to Jemison, 9 June 1945, Commission Records, Box 3, Folder 4; and Alldredge to Jemison, 22 September 1944.

[37]Alldredge to Jemison, 8 August 1945, Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 58; and Jemison to Alldredge, 18 August 1945. War Production Board material is in Box 3, Folder 4.

transform cultural prejudice into Christian love across the color line, starting with the leadership of the races, in order to eliminate strife. Jemison saw this dynamic at work in himself and Alldredge, as Baptist leaders across the racial divide: "my heart is right in its relationship to its white brethren and sisters and I feel from the bottom of my heart that your heart is as good or better than mine… . No man or woman possessed with racial prejudice and denomination dislikes is capable of leadership in this day when the Spirit of God should have the upper most seat in our hearts and we should be entirely dispossessed of racial prejudice and denominational envy and strife."[38]

Jemison was well aware, of course, that Southern Baptists (including Alldredge) were by no means "entirely dispossessed of racial prejudice." SBC seminaries and churches remained segregated for the time being, and over the coming decades, Southern Baptist hostility toward civil rights activism would be commonplace.[39] Even as Southern Baptists like Alldredge pressed his convention to come to the financial aid of their black brethren and professed a measure of spiritual equality, they by no means pursued or desired full social equality between the races.[40] So, to some extent, Jemison was certainly flattering the ego of his Southern Baptist collaborator with his gilded language and high ideals. But even so, it would be cynically unwise to summarily discount his declarations of gratitude and hopefulness as mere fluff and filler. Though Jemison certainly knew that Southern Baptists' shortcomings were plentiful, a charitable reading would indicate that he also believed that their institutional investment in ABTS, and Alldredge's own deep care and extensive labor to that end, revealed that "the Spirit of God" was indeed at work to (slowly and gradually) ameliorate prejudice and injustice among the people of God. Such was the hope, at any rate, that the work of ABTS evidently elicited in the pursuit of black Baptist education in the South.

III. Calibrating for Racial and Denominational Friction

As much as hopes for racial amelioration may have attached to the work of ABTS, the persistent present realities of racial friction born out of American racism and segregation did not escape the attention of leading figures like D. V. Jemison. Paternalistic white attitudes and conflicts of vision between black and white Baptists were historical certainties, and in the face of such challenges, the seminary project's idealistic premise of Baptist unity fell well short of full realization. Southern Baptists like Alldredge often showed an assertiveness that bespoke a domineering desire for control, and National Baptists leaders like Jemison carefully calibrated their words and actions to advance black Baptist interests while also cautiously navigating their white partners' racial sensibilities. This type of friction and calibration is evident in the Jemison–Alldredge correspondence, even as the two men developed a mutual respect and friendship over the course of their 2-year working relationship. Eventually, by late 1945, Alldredge found himself embroiled in a conflict with J. Pius Barbour – now the editor of the *National Baptist Voice* – which put

[38]Jemison to Alldredge, 18 August 1945.

[39]See, e.g., Hawkins, *The Bible Told Them So*.

[40]In the words of historian David Roach, "a general belief in equality never meant anything except separate but equal for Southern Baptists in the decade following World War II." David Roach, *The Southern Baptist Convention & Civil Rights, 1954–1995* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 2. Likewise, Kidd and Hankins describe average 1950s Southern Baptists as believing that "Baptist faith had nothing to do with civil rights," thus functionally supporting an individualistic theology that was "put into the service of maintaining segregation." Kidd and Hankins, *Baptists in America*, 221–225.

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Jemison in a tenuous position and ultimately augured a marked interpersonal cooling in their correspondence.

Alldredge's zeal for black Baptist education at ABTS was unquestionably exceptional among his Southern Baptist contemporaries, but even this work reflected a good deal of white paternalistic saviorism. Throughout his career, he routinely found himself pushing and prodding his fellow Southern Baptists to bolster their "pitiable efforts" to supply the needs of black theological education, often pressing the issue in the midst of a denomination whose majority was sadly inclined to turn a deaf ear toward any such remonstrations.[41] These fundraising pleas often also invoked persistent racial stereotypes from the widespread scientific racism of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century – for instance, citing the "religious nature of the Negro people" and the "great natural religious forces of the race" as innate black traits that needed to be harnessed by proper formal education and external (white) guidance.[42] This state of affairs required white intervention and funding, as Southern Baptists "are trying to play the part of a Big Brother to this needy race."[43]

Alldredge made no such overt racial claims in his early communications with Jemison, but even amid their very explicit expressions of Baptist fraternity, their initial exchanges contained some material that could easily convey a subtext of racial and denominational tension. To revisit a familiar example, in his first letter to Jemison, Alldredge rather aggressively (or, to use Jemison's preferred term, "frankly") expressed Southern Baptists' dismay at the NBC's consideration of a Crozer graduate like J. Pius Barbour as ABTS president, fearing that this might indicate a proliferation of "modernism" or northern "denominational politics" among National Baptists – two qualities that Southern Baptists "do not relish."[44] While avoiding explicit racial commentary, Alldredge's forcefulness in pressing this issue certainly served as a pointed reminder of the degree to which the seminary relied on Southern Baptist support. By implication, and in accord with Jim Crow stereotypes, Southern Baptist intellectual and theological discernment was needed to guard the vulnerable National Baptists from falling prey to the siren song of theological liberalism. If Southern Baptists had no direct hand in choosing the National Baptist candidate for seminary president, then their financial backing and conspicuous statements of dissatisfaction served to give them at least a heckler's veto.

For his part, Jemison demonstrated the need for careful calculation by black Baptists in responding to potential sources of interracial or interdenominational strife. To be sure, he was no shrinking violet; he expected a measure of respect for both himself and his convention. Early on, he rebuffed a passing criticism of previous NBC leadership by proudly reminding Alldredge that the opportunity "to work with the present president of the National Baptist Convention" should be considered a "privilege" for white Baptists. However, on issues of Southern Baptists' relation to the seminary, and specifically following on Alldredge's emphatic concerns about modernism, Jemison's responses

[41]Alldredge, "Southern Baptists and Negro Theological Education," Commission Records, Box 2, Folder 67.

Alldredge's struggle to interest average churchgoers was typical of SBC racial ambivalence. See Hawkins, *The Bible Told Them So*, 19, 40; and Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 130–135.

[42]Alldredge to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 31 August 1932, Commission Records, Box 6, Folder 43. See also Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 36–37.

[43]Alldredge to J. Percy Priest, 12 July 1945, Commission Records, Box 3, Folder 4.

[44]Alldredge to Jemison, 19 January 1944.

seemed calculated, by necessity, to fit white Baptists' narratives and assuage their fears. He regularly framed the seminary project, when writing to Alldredge, in terms of white beneficence that would flatter Southern Baptists. National Baptists were "anxious" to show Southern Baptists "that we are … worthy of what is being done for us," as well as "beseeching your continued interest, sympathy, and cooperation." Black Baptists would work to ensure that the "help that is being furnished by our good White brethren" does not "sanctify idleness," but rather ignites "an intense interest in helping ourselves." No doubt he did feel genuine gratitude, but the manner of expression was also tailored to fit southern white sensibilities.[45]

Jemison likewise picked up on Alldredge's fundamentalist hostility toward modernism and crafted his responses accordingly. He flatly repudiated the idea of nominating a seminary president "who in any way was modernistic" or insufficiently committed to Baptists' "denominational doctrines." He further sought to reassure Alldredge along these lines that J. Pius Barbour, the potential presidential nominee, was "not modernistic" and was "straight on denominationalism." Yet despite these assurances, when Ralph W. Riley was chosen to replace Barbour, Jemison's careful language again implied that this was a concession to Southern Baptist pressure. Realizing that Barbour would have likely been a source of major conflict with the Southern Baptists, Jemison explained to Alldredge that the new candidate "is really a better fit… . I am sure you will like him better than the first man."[46]

Although Jemison navigated these racial undercurrents in the process of building a friendly and productive relationship with Alldredge during 1944–1945, another conflict centering on J. Pius Barbour in December 1945 would escalate tensions once again. After withdrawing his name from consideration for the ABTS presidency in spring 1944, Barbour soon rose to the head of a different National Baptist institution, becoming the editor of the denomination's newspaper, the *National Baptist Voice.* From this perch, he still maintained an interest in the work of the seminary and a concern, perhaps informed by his own experience, about what he saw as theological narrow-mindedness at the school. In the December 1, 1945, issue of the *Voice*, Barbour aired some of his reservations in an editorial titled "Is There Religious Freedom at Our Seminary?" Most qualified black teachers, he said, hailed from more liberal northern schools because they had been "cut off" from southern institutions. Consequently, these prospective faculty were trained in "the Historical approach" (that is to say, the higher-critical or historical-critical approach to biblical scholarship), which Southern Baptists decried as insidious modernism, thus leading these teachers to "fear that they would not be allowed to teach the truth as they saw it."[47]

Barbour's concerns not only reflected elements of his own experience with ABTS but also highlighted certain power dynamics that might drive conflict between black and white Baptists running the school. Well aware that "the charter says" that the seminary's governance was vested with the Board of Directors, which was two-thirds National Baptist, he had also seen firsthand the influence of Southern Baptist figures like Alldredge in administrative decisions. Moreover, a Southern Baptist majority controlled the school's property via the Holding Board, "and nothing but a fool ignores the opinions of the men

[45]Jemison to Alldredge, 22 January 1944; Jemison to Alldredge, 7 February 1944; and Jemison to Alldredge, 14 February 1944.

[46]Jemison to Alldredge, 22 January 1944; and Jemison to Alldredge, 21 February 1944.

[47]J. Pius Barbour, "Is There Religious Freedom at Our Seminary?" *National Baptist Voice*, 1 December 1945.

who hold the property." From Barbour's perspective, this was an unspoken threat hanging over National Baptists' heads like a guillotine. While ABTS might appear on the surface more balanced than other white-funded black schools, he implied, it was still an exercise in white control. White Baptist power over the property gave them substantial, albeit implicit, influence on the governance of the school. The result, according to the editorial, was a seminary hamstrung by Southern Baptist prejudice against faculty from a more theologically liberal, northern background.[48]

Unsurprisingly, this editorial infuriated Alldredge, who kept close tabs on any media coverage of the seminary he could find. He promptly wrote a scathing three-page response to the article and fired it off to Jemison, fulminating at the editor's overstep and, presumably, expecting the NBC president to rectify the situation. Barbour was defending northern schools that had abandoned "all the orthodox Baptist doctrines," and he sought to "inject all their poisonous infidelities into the student body," making "infidels out of our Seminary students." As "a Christian institution" and more pointedly "a Baptist Theological Seminary," ABTS was committed to teaching "the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ" and "the faith once for all delivered to the saints," both of which excluded a modernistic historical-critical view of the Bible. In these declamations, Alldredge once again collocated traditionalist (conservative) Baptist identity and the true Christian faith of Jesus himself, as he and Jemison had mutually affirmed in earlier exchanges. He also bristled at Barbour's implication that Southern Baptists controlled hiring decisions, since "the Holding Board has not the remotest suggestion of control over what is taught at the Seminary" – rather ironic, given Alldredge's own backchannel role in stopping Barbour from becoming seminary president. He concluded that Barbour's desire to bring in "a group of learned Unitarian and modernistic teachers to sow infidelity in the minds and hearts of the Seminary students" would meet fierce resistance from both white and black members of the Board of Directors.[49]

To Alldredge, this incident reinforced the fears that he had expressed to Jemison 2 years earlier, when the Crozer-educated Barbour had been under consideration for the ABTS job. He saw in Barbour's conduct both theological modernism and insufficient commitment to Baptist doctrines. And, though Alldredge did not explicitly mention racial activism, it is also noteworthy that within just a few years, Barbour would take under his wing another young Crozer student named Martin Luther King, Jr., often hosting King for dinner and engaging in lengthy theological and social discourses.[50] And just as Alldredge feared liberal incursions from Barbour, many white Southern Baptists in the 1950s and 1960s expressed hostility toward King as a "liberal" on both theological and racial grounds. In fact, when King was invited in 1961 to speak at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, his appearance generated such backlash from Southern Baptist pews that SBTS was forced to issue a statement of apology. These critics' objections were directed not only toward King's racial program, but also toward his theological liberalism, echoing some of the Southern Baptist objections to Barbour in 1944–1945.[51] In this light, we might reasonably speculate that Alldredge's criticism of Barbour in December 1945 included implicit worries about social radicalism that might

[48]Ibid.

[49]Alldredge, "Editor Barbour Makes a Bad Suggestion," Commission Records, Box 7, Folder 34.

[50]Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 77–78.

[51]Roach, *The Southern Baptist Convention & Civil Rights*, 90–94.

upend the South's status quo, although the explicit issues that he raised to Jemison were admittedly limited to theology and Baptist denominationalism.

In previous correspondence, Jemison had offered assurances that Barbour was neither a modernist nor an ecumenist, but that was no longer acceptable to Alldredge, who now threatened to make this situation a public spectacle in the denominational press. Thus, it fell to Jemison to walk the tightrope of defusing Southern Baptist outrage while also defending the independence and utility of the National Baptist editor. Knowing that Alldredge's earlier letters about Barbour and Crozer had emphasized an expressly fundamentalist opposition to modernist theology, Jemison calibrated his response accordingly. He was "surprised" to read Barbour's article and promised to write to him about the serious mistake of publishing "anything that looks like an attack upon our Theological Seminary." National Baptists "are fundamentalist and will not tolerate any modernistic teaching in the Seminary" since "our president is a fundamentalist and of course the teachers … will necessarily be fundamental." Furthermore, he promised, National Baptists would not support "a modernistic as editor of our National Baptist Voice," and "demands for an explanation from Dr. Barbour will be requested."[52]

In part, this reaction reflected real theological divides within National Baptist circles. As a sincere theological traditionalist himself, Jemison had butted heads years prior with J. Pius Barbour's older brother and predecessor at the *Voice*, Russell C. Barbour, over the question of whether the church needed to change its message to reach modern-day youth. While the elder Barbour's social progressivism contended that "old-time" religion must give way to "pressing social questions of the day," Jemison had rejoined that the church would "be blotted from the face of the earth" before it would "surrender its principles at the demand of worldly-minded professors of religion."[53] So it is no stretch to see Jemison's reaction to J. Pius Barbour as a legitimate extension of previous contentions with the Barbours and an authentic expression of theological concern. On this count, he likely resonated with some of Alldredge's theologically conservative positions. However, it is also notable that Jemison formulated his reply with close attention to linguistic detail. Recalling Alldredge's repeated use of fundamentalist terminology in their previous interactions, this response deliberately mirrored that same language in hopes of placating the Southern Baptist.

At the same time, Jemison also stood to defend Barbour's utility and value as the editor of the *Voice* in the face of Southern Baptist outrage, regardless of whatever personal theological differences might have existed between the black Baptist leaders. If Alldredge hoped that National Baptists would obsequiously oust the editor, he was severely disappointed, as Barbour would remain in the position for nearly two decades. Following up on the controversy, Jemison informed Alldredge that he had discussed with the editor the matter of "unfounded" claims about the Seminary and had instructed him to modify his tone regarding the school, reiterating that "I have never known [Dr. Barbour] to go off on a tangent … as he did this time." Jemison also, notably, defended the autonomy and independence of the NBC by treating the incident as being the sole purview of the National Baptists. It was a matter to be resolved internally by black Baptists – specifically by Jemison, "as president of the National Baptist Convention" – apart from officious Southern Baptist intrusions. As such, he warned Alldredge rather bluntly to drop the

[52]Jemison to Alldredge, 18 December 1945, Commission Records, Box 7, Folder 34.

[53]Thomas E. Bergler, "Youth, Christianity, and the Crisis of Civilization, 1930–1945," *Religion and American Culture* **24**, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 279. Bergler identifies Barbour as a "social progressive" and a "modernist," whereas Jemison was among those who held more "traditional theological positions."

matter altogether: "I would not like to see you get into a discussion with Dr. Barbour on the question," since a public disputation would "not help the Seminary … [and] destroy the usefulness of Dr. Barbour as it relates to the editorship of the Voice." Preserving Barbour's utility to the denomination meant that Jemison had to handle things on his own, internally, and force Alldredge away from public attacks. After this rebuke against denominational meddling, Jemison's concluding reassurance that "you are orthodox and fundamental and so are we" reads as an attempt to soften the potential blow to a Southern Baptist ego.[54]

Alldredge was successfully diverted from his crusade against Barbour, though the issue obviously continued to privately gnaw at him. Amid the controversy, Barbour had personally responded to Alldredge, explaining that "you are seeing in me and my article things that are absolutely foreign to me"; he argued that northern training in "the historical approach" was entirely compatible with Baptist doctrines, and advised that "to call all the men from the other seminaries 'infidels' will strike at some of the most devout friends the seminary has." However, the Southern Baptist was having none of it. More than a year later, the issue still weighed heavily on his mind. In early 1947, he privately wrote to Barbour again, condemning the editor's position as a "sinister suggestion" to hire "heretical" teachers, and more than that, an attempt to "smear the Seminary for being orthodox." He also wrote to a fellow white Baptist at this time to recount the controversy, bragging about rebuking "this Smart-Alec" whose "small but powerful group of modernists" wanted "to teach our Negro Baptist boys infidelity," only to be "set upon by his own leaders." The purported modernist threat that Alldredge perceived in Barbour's editorial also highlighted a sense of racial possessiveness from Southern Baptists for "*our* Negro seminary" and "*our* Negro Baptist boys." Though he was diverted from public comment, the controversy lingered in Alldredge's mind for years, illustrating the seminary's fraught position as an experiment in Baptist interracial cooperation floating atop a bevy of racialized undercurrents.[55]

IV. An Abrupt Relational Break

Jemison's success in navigating between white Baptist pressure and black Baptist autonomy in the case of the Alldredge–Barbour dispute also augured a sharp break in his partnership with Alldredge. After their back-and-forth in December 1945 and January 1946, the two would not communicate again for more than half a year. In fact, over the next 3 years leading up to Alldredge's retirement in 1949, the archival records only indicate two sets of epistolary exchanges between them – one in July 1946 and another in March–April 1948. These letters offered a much colder and more detached tone than earlier correspondence. There was little here in terms of elaborate greetings, personal superlatives, ministerial encouragements, declarations of Baptist brotherhood, or the like.[56] While neither party made any explicit comment as to the obvious change in tone and sharp decline in frequency of their communication, nor any overt reference back to

[54]Jemison to Alldredge, 5 January 1946, Commission Records, Box 7, Folder 34.

[55]Barbour to Alldredge, 27 December 1945, Commission Records, Box 7, Folder 34; Alldredge to Barbour, 5 January 1947, Commission Records, Box 2, Folder 71; and Alldredge to A. D. Muse, 8 January 1947, Commission Records, Box 6, Folder 11.

[56]All letters from July 1946 and March/April 1948 are in Commission Records, Box 5, Folder 59, except for Alldredge to Jemison, 12 March 1948 (Box 2, Folder 73).

the dispute with Barbour, the timeline makes a strong case for the editorial conflict as an abrupt breaking point in their relationship, which had been characterized up to that point by a growing warmth and cooperative fraternity.

Such an explanation makes a certain sense from both sides, especially considering the racial tensions and undertones in play. Alldredge had been suspicious of Barbour as a theological liberal from the very beginning of the ABTS administrative search in 1944, but he had received Jemison's assurances that the man was by no means a modernist. Once the conflict over the *Voice* editorial ignited in late 1945, Alldredge unquestionably saw it as ironclad confirmation of his initial fears of modernist infiltration into National Baptist ranks, and perhaps an indictment of Jemison's leadership. While Alldredge believed this strain of theological adaptation (or, in his parlance, "infidelity") was still a minority view among black Baptists, he also saw its existence among high leadership at influential institutions like the *Voice* as a potential threat to the hard work and money that Southern Baptists had devoted to black education at ABTS. One might wonder if the incident also deflated his opinion of Jemison's reliability and discernment as a judge of National Baptist personnel. If Alldredge perceived Jemison to be tolerating a modernist in the black Baptist ranks, then the president's sidelining of public Southern Baptist criticism was also unlikely to sit well. Employing newly frigid overtones would appear to be a predictable response.

Jemison, for his part, also very likely felt considerable strain and frustration at such an aggressive attempt by a Southern Baptist to insert himself into National Baptist politics. That this attack came from a man who had been an ally and a friend for 2 years undoubtedly made this situation all the more acute. More than simply bringing the matter to Jemison's attention, Alldredge had overtly and repeatedly called the editor of the *National Baptist Voice* an "infidel," and pressured Jemison to levy institutional discipline in proportion to such a severe accusation. Such overt meddling in National Baptist affairs from someone with no standing to do so – in violation of the Baptist principle of ecclesiastical independence, no less – was destined to end poorly from the beginning. While Jemison's response was calculated to appease Alldredge to an extent, it also displayed a willingness to defend black Baptist independence by pushing back against white interference in the denomination's institutional operations. That a chilling of the relationship – on both sides – should follow this incident, then, seems an unsurprising outcome.

None of this is to say that the relationship entirely evaporated. Both men continued to serve the seminary, attend trustee meetings, and deal with the school's business relative to their denominational bodies. They undoubtedly interacted in such contexts, even as they also exchanged extremely infrequent letters in the subsequent years. However, the waning of that relationship does illustrate the tensions and pitfalls that attended these interracial efforts premised on Baptist unity. Their few written exchanges after 1945 simply addressed necessary formal matters related to the seminary, with little in the way of personal considerations. In July 1946, Jemison reached out to inquire about potential support from the SBC's Woman's Missionary Union, but even discussing a substantive topic, both men maintained a distant air and eschewed personal greetings.

Interestingly, Jemison did show a willingness to directly (if briefly) address the topic of racism in broad strokes, whereas earlier letters had tended to exclusively emphasize white magnanimity. True interracial partnership, he said, is hindered by "the petty things" of racial prejudice, and such problems will remain intractable until both races are willing to "work together as Christians observing the Golden Rule… . I believe that Christians should be Christians and not pretend to be." In addition to this greater candor on the topic

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of racism, it is also worth noting that Jemison addressed his July 1946 letters to "Dr. Aldrich" – a misspelling that he had conscientiously corrected after their first interaction two and a half years prior, but which now curiously (and perhaps passive-aggressively) reoccurred. Their next and final exchange, so far as the archival records suggest, came another 2 years later, when Alldredge began a letter about the upcoming Board of Directors meeting with the rather flippant address of "Dear Big Chief" – a far cry from the "Dear Beloved" of years past. Once again, the content of the exchange remained relatively pragmatic and neutral, but even the manners of address between the two men indicated a more contentious dynamic than in former years.[57]

In the end, the relationship between D. V. Jemison and E. P. Alldredge is significant not as a world-shaping alliance or a turning point of Baptist history, but rather as a compelling microcosm of both the promises and tensions at play in Baptist interracial efforts at a key moment in the Jim Crow South. The cooperative work of Southern and National Baptists on a seminary for black ministers, especially in a way that ensured a relative degree of operational balance between black and white stakeholders, is unusual and remarkable in this historical context. This is not to say that the ideals of parity and fraternity were fully realized; indeed, the turbulence that ultimately strained the relationship between Jemison and Alldredge illustrates the ways that white Baptists often expected by default to exercise control. For the eight decades since emancipation, white Baptists in the South had typically looked at their black counterparts as deficient and subordinate, not only in terms of material resources but often intellectually and morally as well: a pitiable mission field in need of white guidance, rather than mutual partners or equals in the faith. Going back even further, white Southern Baptists had not only argued in favor of slavery but even founded their convention as a way of protecting the interests of slaveholding Baptists. It would be relentlessly naïve to expect a collaborative endeavor like ABTS to simply dissipate the weight of such history with the snap of a finger. Southern Baptists in this joint venture (even those of good will) remained often mired in the racism and paternalism of their southern heritage, and National Baptists were quite aware that the partnership would entail struggles for control. However, at the same time, the attempt at a governing balance between the conventions, the articulation of the ideal (albeit imperfectly implemented) of Baptist mutuality, and the practical experience of crossing racial boundaries all marked the ABTS project as an unusual feature on the Jim Crow landscape.

Among other things, the relationship between Jemison and Alldredge illuminates in microcosm twin realities that confronted this type of religious interracialism, pressing in opposite directions. On the one hand, a shared confessional religious identity – in this case, Baptist identity – offered an avenue for commonality, fellowship, and religious unity that allowed participants to operate across racial lines in unusual ways and to conceptualize a religious connection that, in theory, transcended race. The regular drumbeat in Jemison and Alldredge's early letters surrounding Baptist ideals, Baptist interests, and the superiority of Baptist doctrines did facilitate a degree of fraternal warmth and friendship between these Baptist leaders separated by the color line. On the other hand, the social dynamics of race in Jim Crow America and the commonplace assumptions of white superiority that suffused the culture ensured that white Baptists would often be in a position to press their own interests at the expense of their black counterparts. The cultural power imbalance in favor of whites berthed racial tensions and struggles, which National Baptists had to navigate with care, and which, at times, worked directly against

[57]Jemison to Alldredge, 25 July 1946; and Alldredge to Jemison, 12 March 1948.

the theological ideal of Baptist unity and parity upon which the seminary was supposedly premised. This dynamic stirred up subtle eddies even in Jemison and Alldredge's early communications, but the ripples grew into waves when Alldredge sought to interject himself into National Baptist denominational affairs over the conflict with J. Pius Barbour. Southern Baptists did indeed have power to lean on their black counterparts, but Alldredge's pressure and Jemison's calculated response in defense of black Baptist autonomy effectively chilled the warmth of Baptist fraternity that they had previously cultivated. The story of the relationship between these two Baptist leaders, even if small in scope, poignantly illuminates the contours of religious interracialism in the Jim Crow South on the eve of the social transformations of the 1950s. This was an endeavor offering a degree of Christian unity and common purpose, yet still caught in the prevailing winds of racism and prejudice that had so long guided American culture.

Daniel R. Bare is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Texas A&M University, College Station.

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