Alan Scot Willis. All According to God’s Plan: Southern Baptist Missions and Race, 1945–1970. All According to God’s Plan: Southern Baptist Missions and Race, 1945–1970. (Religion in the South.) by Alan Scot Willis
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the 1940s and 1950s. Activists from national organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference assisted local people in their struggles for political participation, school integration, and improved public services in the 1960s.

Unlike most studies of the civil rights movement, Fleming extends the story into the decades after 1965. The last three chapters of the book offer a detailed account of the long struggle to wrest political control of the county from white supremacists (an effort that did not succeed until the 1980s) and the problems encountered by black elected officials who proved unable to effect significant change. Using material gained from interviews with local residents, Fleming reveals the strength of white opposition and the often vindictive measures taken by county officials to prevent black empowerment. Economic reprisals, arson, and violent attacks on activists continued well into the late twentieth century. Local authorities ended the ferry service that connected Gee’s Bend to the town of Camden, forcing residents to drive ninety miles around a peninsula to reach the town instead of taking a quick trip across the Alabama River. In response to a court order to integrate the faculty as well as the student body of the county’s schools, the superintendent randomly reassigned teachers without regard to their subjects of specialization. White flight from the public schools into private, all-white academies led segregation intact and ensured inadequate funding for the county schools that black children attended. When African Americans gained control over the school board in 1982, they were left without the money they needed to fix a decrepit educational system that many believed had been deliberately sabotaged.

As Fleming notes, the persistent poverty and failing schools that still characterize Wilcox County today are problems that are shared by other black communities throughout the nation. White residents, like their counterparts elsewhere, deny any responsibility for these conditions, attributing them instead to genetic or cultural traits that supposedly hinder black achievement. Yet Fleming’s study powerfully demonstrates that white racism, not black deficiencies, is to blame. “As America moves into the new millennium,” she concludes, “it is imperative that national policy makers begin to come to grips with the reality of these links between past exploitation that resulted in an incredible maldistribution of wealth and present degradation of the victims of this process” (p. 313).

This is a book about racism, religion, and Southern Baptist missions in the twentieth-century South. Alan Scot Willis explores the role of progressives who worked in specific mission agencies related to the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), including the Home Mission Board, the Foreign Mission Board, and the Women’s Missionary Union. Other agencies such as the Social Service Commission, the Christian Life Commission, seminaries, and colleges also provided significant progressive leadership on matters of race during the years 1945–1970.

Willis contends that missionaries and other progressives worked to make the idea of racial equality an actuality among Southern Baptists. His documentation of their work is a significant contribution to studies in southern racial and denominational history. Indeed, in using popular denominational periodicals as the primary sources for his study, Willis documents progressive voices that have not received sufficient attention in the past. This is particularly true of the contribution of Southern Baptist women in addressing racism, segregation, and the need for social change in the South.

The first chapter offers an insightful overview of the cultural and religious situation confronted by SBC progressives in the post-World War II era. Willis insists that “race was the most important area of disagreement between the progressive leadership and the more conservative elements of the denomination” (p. 14) during those years. This is evident in the controversial efforts of Southwestern Baptist Seminary professor T. B. Maston to call issues of race to the attention of the SBC constituency in his 1946 pamphlet entitled “Of One”: A Study of Christian Principles and Race Relations, published by the Woman’s Missionary Union, auxiliary to the SBC. (Maston’s first publication on race appeared in 1927.) He and others challenged the Jim Crow “biblical arguments” related to divine sanctions against interracial marriage and “mixing” of the races. They also suggested that Southern Baptists could not extend their evangelistic imperative nationally and internationally as long as they perpetuated racial division at home.

This latter assertion was a major theme that progressives used in their attempts to move the SBC toward public stands in behalf of Brown vs. the Board of Education (1954) and other early events in the civil rights movement. In certain Baptist-related colleges, such as Wake Forest in North Carolina and Mercer in Georgia, the admission of African students who had been converted through Southern Baptist missionary work was an important element in the desegregation of the student body. Progressives worked hard to secure admission for African Americans in their seminaries and colleges throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Perhaps the book’s most important contribution is in the documentation of the writing of progressive Southern Baptist women and their opposition to racism and segregation in their society and their denomination. Willis makes extensive use of articles written by women in denominational periodicals. The latter include the Royal Service and The Window, magazines of the Wom-
an’s Missionary Union; Home Missions magazine; and various papers from state Baptist conventions. We learn the names of many men and women, heretofore largely unknown, who spoke out for racial justice in the postwar years. For example, in a Royal Service article, Katherine Parker Freeman described a 1946 meeting of some twenty Southern Baptist women to work toward racial reconciliation. She noted that they had come to realize that “in the heart of God, black is as beautiful and dear as white” (p. 156). Likewise, women like Alma Hunt, longtime executive secretary of the Woman’s Missionary Union, demonstrated progressive leadership in raising the consciousness of southern women to the racial crisis. These progressives did not address black/white relations only. They called Southern Baptists to respond to racism as directed toward Native Americans, Latinos, and other minorities in American society.

Willis notes various aspects of opposition to these progressives, many of whom were also under attack from conservatives for introducing elements of theological liberalism into Southern Baptist life. This anticipated greater divisions in the SBC over other theological and ethical issues. In fact, Willis concurs with historian Barry Hankins’s assertion that today’s conservatives believe that race was the only correct position advocated by SBC progressives.

Clearly the SBC deserves great criticism for its participation, implicitly and explicitly, in the segregation that characterized the South in the Jim Crow era. Although racial progressivism among Southern Baptists has been discussed in various sources, Willis has shown that it was much more extensive than previously documented. His work also illustrates that denominational periodicals remain a rich resource for reading Southern Baptists on topics yet to be explored.

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This book is an enlightening and lucid analysis of gospel music’s history through the first three quarters of the twentieth century. Jerma A. Jackson gives special attention to describing the significance of a few key female participants and accounting for the crossover of gospel from a purely sacred setting to a more secular, market-driven one during the 1940s and 1950s.

The author makes her argument carefully, drawing from over three dozen live interviews and first person reports supplemented by an up-to-date bibliography. She efficiently describes the early stages of the movement and explains its inspiration within the worship setting of Pentecostal and Holiness (or Sanctified) sects of black Protestantism circa 1900. While much of the book is devoted to the central role of Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915–1973), Jackson begins at the beginning by linking the post-Civil War emergence of arranged spirituals with what came after.

Blues and gospel arose from the same African American cultural and economic matrix in the dismal social environment of the 1890s. Pressed down by suffering and loneliness, many black singers were emotionally drawn to ecstatic religion and demonstrative forms of personal expression. Yet many religious people disavowed connections to the impious lifestyles and songs associated with bluesmen. At a time when the spirituals had come to be accepted as the chief form of black religious music, embodied in such groups as the Fisk (University) Jubilee Singers, early gospel singers were seeking something quite different, a style both fervid and worshipful. They proudly cited biblical authority for their intense musical expressions (p. 16).

The spirituals were known primarily as a cappella choral pieces, performed in smooth, close harmony. Gospel’s first practitioners embraced a rougher, wilder style, which found freer singing, a wider range of physical gesture, more gravelly vocalism, and even shouting to be legitimate. With instruments added, such as guitars, tambourines, drums, and horns, the contrast with the sober older style could not have been more pronounced (p. 23). Both blues and gospel were recorded and widely distributed in the 1920s, the first decade when the term “gospel” was applied to this new type of religious song (p. 4).

“The 1930s saw the exuberant religious movement expand from the margins of black religious communities to the center of black religious life” (p. 5). When Thomas Dorsey, the composer of “Precious Lord” and other hymns, and Sallie Martin, a dedicated and lively Georgia singer, made common cause at Chicago’s Pilgrim Baptist Church, a powerful partnership resulted. Through publishing their songs and organizing touring quartets and choirs, these two developed gospel as a commercial, interdenominational venture. Tharpe pushed the envelope further by taking her swinging religious enthusiasm onto the nightclub stage. Jackson explains Tharpe’s early experience helping her mother’s work as a traveling missionary. Mother and daughter migrated widely, singing, playing (mandolin and guitar), and, preaching, although women were officially barred from the pulpit. Jackson fleshes out Tharpe’s story, based on a thorough consideration of her recordings as well as published accounts, stressing the steadfast spiritual basis for Tharpe’s work, even as her concerts filled theaters, arenas, and public auditoriums and her purse grew.

In 1938, Tharpe’s performance on the stage of the renowned Cotton Club in New York and a cover story in Life Magazine gave her instant notoriety and a national reputation. Such moves marked a decisive turn in the public perception of gospel. Following World War II, gospel music’s money-making potential would be more fully exploited, and Tharpe’s personal reputation would decline as negative impressions persisted about her motives. Jackson avoids a cynical interpretation of these developments but faithfully recounts the ups and