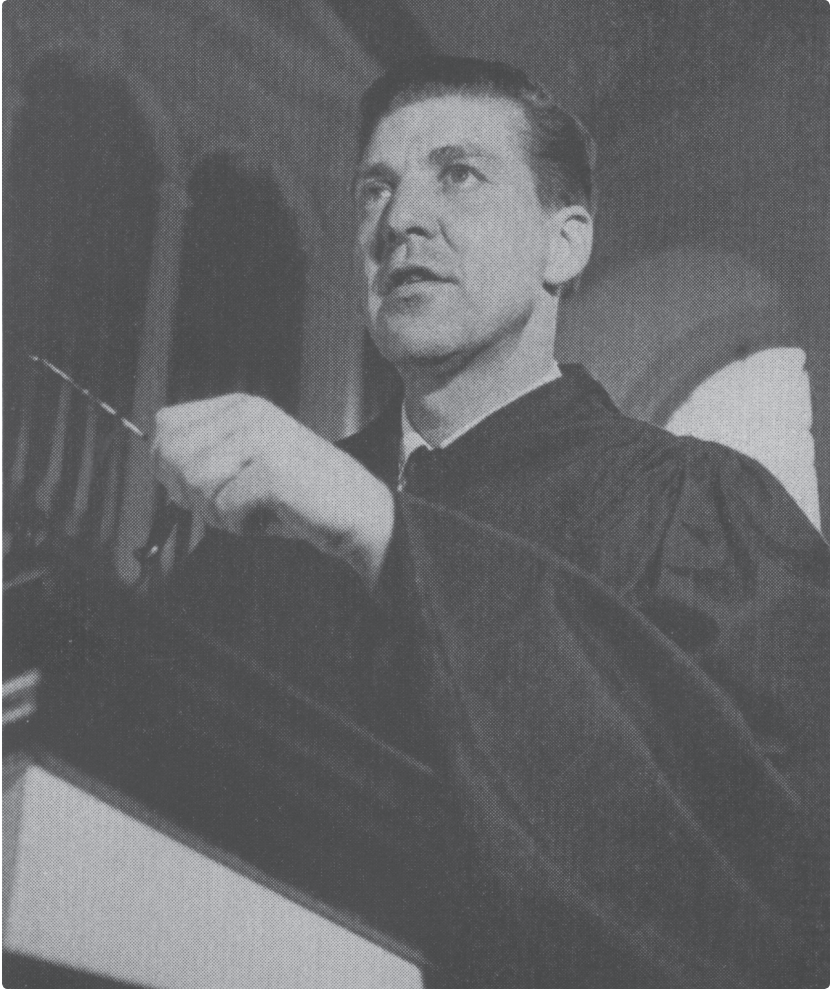


Georgia Brunner

The Backlash to Charles M. Jones's Project of Racial Integration

Before the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) opened its doors to black students and before basketball coach Dean Smith famously walked into a segregated restaurant with two black friends, Reverend Charles M. Jones invited African American community members into his Chapel Hill Presbyterian congregation in 1943. The North Carolina Orange Presbytery, after swift and aggressive uproar, eventually put Jones on trial. The trial mentioned Jones's integration project sparingly and generally in charging Jones with a lack of devotion to Presbyterian doctrine. In the trial, clear sides formed between the local congregation who, for the most part, stood by its minister, and the larger county-wide church leadership, who vehemently opposed Jones and his social project.

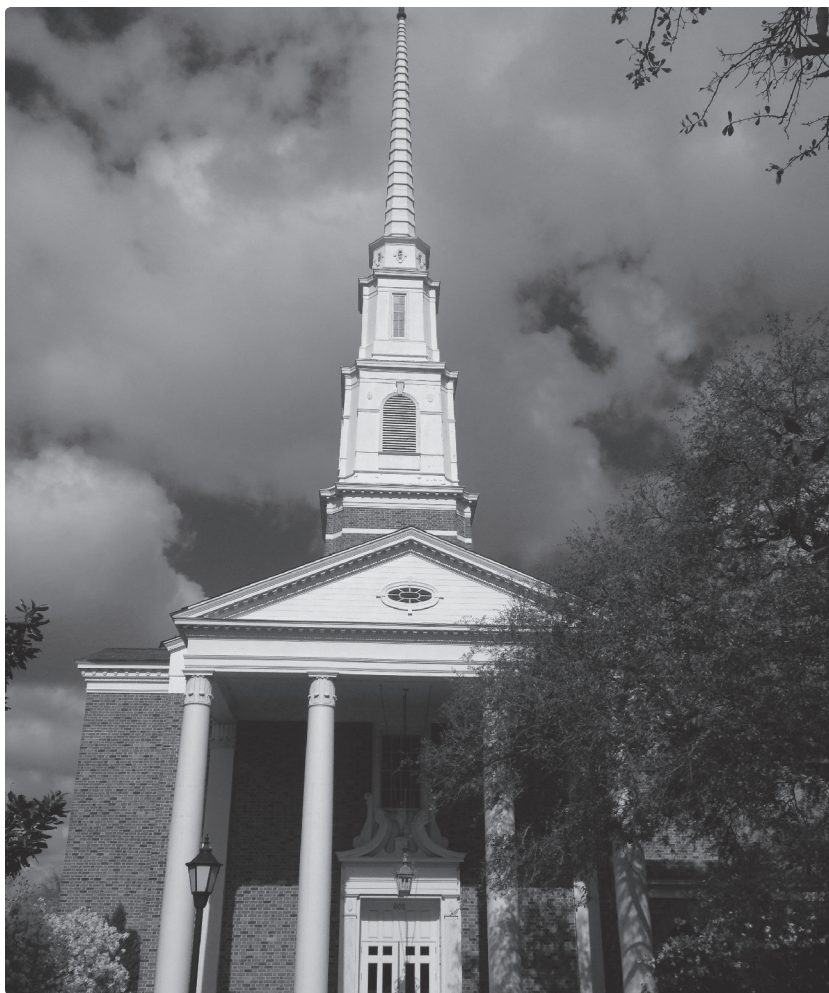
Jones received thousands of letters of support and opposition, which usually invoked questions of race issues and images of good and evil. While no specific language in the trial documents points to integration as the primary concern, these letters clearly highlight integration as the leading cause of the trial. Though Jones's supporters and opponents both drew from the same Christian sources of authority in making their cases, they reached very different conclusions. Supporters drew primarily from Biblical sources, while



The Rev. Charles M. Jones in the pulpit. Jones created an uproar by attempting to integrate his Chapel Hill Presbyterian congregation in 1943. (*Photo courtesy of Mark Pryor.*)

opponents referred to the strict rules of Presbyterianism to call for the separation of church and social justice.

Letters and other communications with Jones reveal the connection between Jones's case and larger debates between liberal and conservative Presbyterians of the time. Indeed, this split in the community mirrored the reaction to other liberal actions taken in the Presbyterian Church, which were followed by a reactionary backlash. The split between liberals and conservatives within the Church, both in North Carolina and across



First Presbyterian Church, where Jones served starting in 1941. The church is prominently located on Franklin Street, across from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (*Photo by Garrett W. Wright.*)

the South, manifested itself through different appeals to religion. Using religious language, both liberals and conservatives rallied to political causes that reflected larger national debates. Debates surrounding Jones's trial in Chapel Hill therefore illustrate how liberals and conservatives used the language of the Bible to advance markedly different agendas.

Jones's Political Beginnings

Charles Jones started his work in the Church haphazardly and without a strong commitment to Presbyterianism itself. After graduating high school in 1923, he worked odd jobs and then went to college on his father's urging.¹ After college, because of his interest in music, Jones took a job as an organist at a church.² The reverend at his church suggested that he go to seminary in Texas, but Jones decided to stay closer to home and went to Clarksville, Virginia, to study music education. Once there, Jones found that, provided more freedom to choose, he preferred to study to become a reverend. He met his future wife during his time in Virginia and they were married upon his completion of seminary.³ Together, they moved to Chapel Hill in 1941.

In North Carolina, Jones preached progressive values such as equality and the social obligations of Christians, demonstrating an early commitment to a political project that culminated in his later integration policies. A report from the congressional committee of his first church in North Carolina asserted that "Mr. Jones has shown himself highly progressive without departing from the basic elements of the religion of Jesus Christ."⁴ By 1942, Jones had allowed black students from the North Carolina College for Negroes in Durham to come to his weekly Sunday breakfasts and the worship afterward at his church.⁵ In January 1943, he organized one of Chapel Hill's first interracial meetings of different religious leaders throughout the community to promote racial and social justice.⁶ The community elected Jones chairman of the newly formed Chapel Hill Interracial Committee.⁷ He continued working towards integration despite continued criticism that would eventually divide his church and later determine the outcome of his trial. His friends and allies in the church

1 Charles M. Jones and Dorcas Jones, interviews by John Egerton, Southern Oral History Program Collection, *Documenting the American South* (hereafter cited as SOHPC), Interview A-0335, July 21, 1990, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/A-0335/menu.html>.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Report of the Congregational Committee, Brevard-Davidson River Presbyterian Church, April 1941, quoted in Mark Pryor, *Faith, Grace and Heresy* (San Jose: Writer's Showcase, 2002), 76.

5 Anon., "A Consideration of the Church and the Racial Problem by the Elders March-June, 1944," July 22, 1944, box 24, folder 3, Charles M. Jones Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as Charles M. Jones Papers).

6 Mark Pryor, *Faith, Grace, and Heresy: The Biography of Rev. Charles M. Jones* (Bloomington: iUniverse Publishing, 2002), 92.

7 Minutes of meeting of Chapel Hill Interracial Committee, November 27, 1942, box 26, folder 1, Charles M. Jones Papers.

also rallied to help accomplish his project as tensions rose.⁸ A majority of the Chapel Hill church elders stood by him, stating, “In his fellowship Jesus transcended the barriers of race, color, creed or social position. The Christian Church, looking to Jesus for its faith and practice, should in like manner transcend these barriers.”⁹ Jones received further support from The Session, the local church court in Chapel Hill. Orange Presbytery, composed of the Council of Elders, ministers and representatives from all the churches in the region, became Jones’s main opponents.¹⁰ Even before the official investigation, clear sides formed between the local church and community, which largely accepted Jones, and the larger church structure, where he was often criticized.

Prior to the official investigation of Jones, several different stakeholders objected to Jones’s project, using racialized language. Perhaps the most conspicuous of these voices came from the National War Department, which compiled a report in 1944 titled “Commingleing of Whites and Negroes at Chapel Hill,” in an attempt to understand and question the role of community leaders and police officers in interracial relations. Because the War Department had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, it was unsympathetic to Jones’s project. The report asserted that the congregation was dwindling and that there would be a crisis unless Jones was replaced.¹¹ Finally, in the summer of 1945, the more conservative members of Jones’s congregation declared their official stance by presenting a petition to the Council of Presbytery that demanded Jones’s resignation, citing his liberal attitudes on certain “social issues.”¹² Jones entertained the concerns of his critics. He sat in small groups with them several times, but eventually their stated concerns grew beyond integration. They “decided to draw up a bill of particulars (not only on race) as to why the Session should receive my resignation,” Jones said, though he believed that things were “still in good shape.”¹³ This proved to be a false hope. The Orange Presbytery took up the calls from his critics and put Jones on trial.

8 Pryor, *Faith, Grace and Heresy*, 104.

9 “A Consideration of the Church and the Racial Problem by the Elders, March-June 1944.” quoted in Pryor, *Faith, Grace and Heresy*, 143.

10 Joel L. Alvis Jr., *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 2.

11 Department of War, fourth division, 1944, quoted in Timothy B. Tyson et al., *Democracy Betrayed* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 257.

12 Pryor, *Faith, Grace and Heresy*, 111.

13 Charles M. Jones to Lee, April 16, 1945, box 1, folder 1, Charles M. Jones Papers.

After the petitioners presented their request, the Orange Presbytery opened an official investigation through an appointed judicial commission. The commission never brought official charges against Jones, but asked for his resignation in 1953.¹⁴ The commission hearing illustrates the official motivations of the trial, primarily concerning a possible violation of Presbyterian doctrine. For example, the commission asked Jones, “Concerning the person of Christ, do you believe that he pre-existed before coming to earth?” Jones responded, “The thing that bothers me about this is this. In what form do you think he pre-existed?”¹⁵ The lead investigator further asked if Jones believed in the virgin birth, which he did not, and the resurrection of Christ, which he acknowledged as a spiritual resurrection.¹⁶ The commission filed a 12-page report of its findings following the investigation. The report listed a number of “problems” in Jones’s congregation, including the reception of unbaptized persons into the church, which “constitutes a serious violation of our denominational policy.”¹⁷ Finally, the commission found fault with several of the church’s elders and deacons who had been neither ordained nor properly installed, an “omission” which the commission took seriously.¹⁸ The commission did not file a formal complaint against Jones, perhaps to avoid accusations of racism, and based its call for his resignation on his divergence from Presbyterian doctrine.

The documents of Jones’s trial rarely mention integration, but the underlying racial problem clearly motivated the investigation. On June 13, 1952, the Orange Presbytery appointed a judicial commission to investigate Jones’s church. By February of the following year the council called for his removal for “the welfare of the church.”¹⁹ In his resignation address in 1953, Jones questioned the phrase “welfare of the church” specifically, as it seemed intentionally vague and included no specific criticisms of his

14 Alvis, *Religion and Race*, 64.

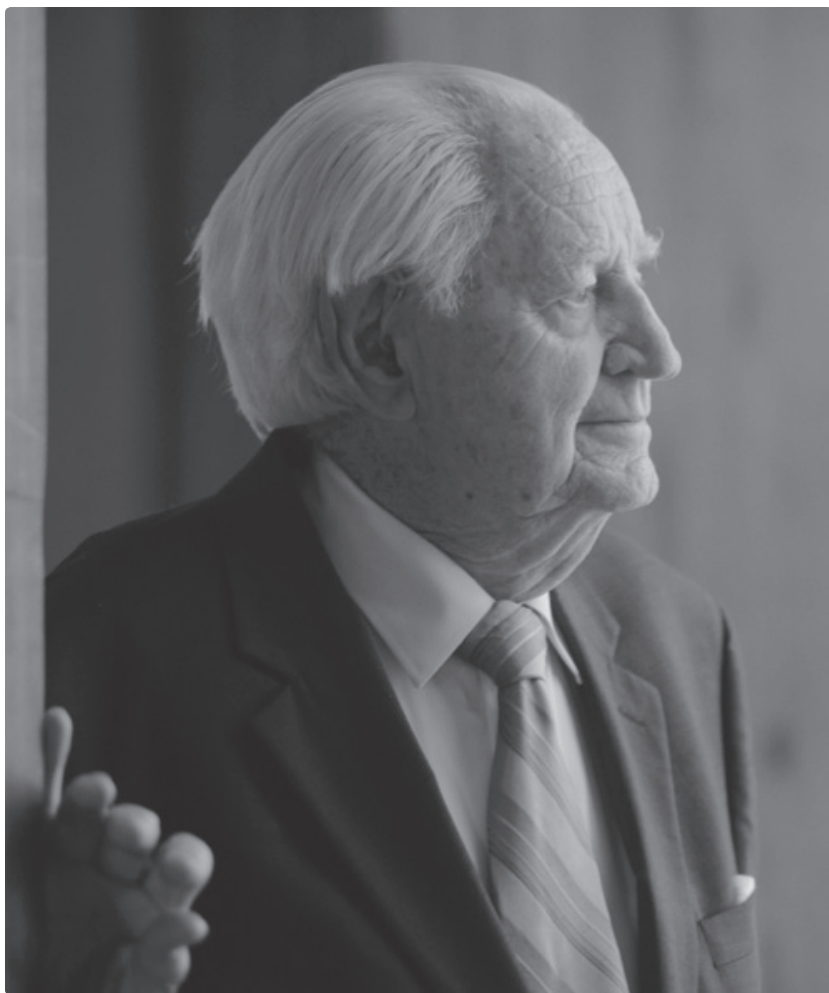
15 Charles M. Jones, interview by John Whitley, October 17, 1952, box 1, folder 25, Charles M. Jones Papers.

16 Ibid.

17 Report of the Judiciary Commission, November 20, 1952, box 1, folder 26, Charles M. Jones Papers.

18 Ibid.

19 Charles M. Jones, “A statement by Charles M. Jones on the occasion of his withdrawing from the Presbyterian ministry: delivered at the summer meeting, Orange Presbytery, Synod of North Carolina, Presbyterian Church of the United States, held at New Hope Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, July 6, 1953,” online access, Charles M. Jones Papers.



The Baptist preacher Robert Seymour accepted an invitation to lead UNC-CH's church. Though he never faced a trial, he felt isolated by the local Baptist community. The Southern Baptist Convention accused Seymour of being concerned with nothing but race. (*Photo by Briana Brough.*)

religious practices.²⁰ Indeed, many of his critics used this sort of appeal to the Church's traditional, theological values as a way to mask more racially motivated concerns.

One of the more obviously racially charged accusations against Jones came from the Council of Presbytery's chairman, Henry T. Patterson. In an unofficial meeting with members of the Council of Presbytery, Patterson

²⁰ Ibid.

claimed, falsely, that Jones was the president of the NAACP chapter in Chapel Hill.²¹ During the preliminary investigation, the judicial commission sent Jones a questionnaire that posed questions concerning racial integration within his church, including, “Did you invite negro members of the U.S. Navy band at Chapel Hill to a social at your church at which refreshments were served?” and “Do you advocate social equality between negroes and white people?”²² Though this questionnaire and Patterson’s comments in his unofficial meeting are the only two instances of explicitly racial language used in this inquiry, they illustrate that the investigators had other motives to try Jones besides examining his Presbyterian doctrine.

Other Perspectives

Outside observers clearly saw the connection between the question of race and Jones’s forced resignation. In a statement in support of Jones against the Synod, a professor at UNC-Chapel Hill claimed, “He has been a fearless champion of the ideal of the brotherhood of man.”²³ Despite the ambiguous language, the message was clear: Jones united all peoples under his congregation, despite the Presbytery’s wishes. *Time Magazine* ran an article on the trial on February 23, 1953, supporting Jones’s integration project and condemning the Orange Presbytery. The article asserted that “a few members of the congregation protested that Pastor Jones was too intent on social reform and racial brotherhood to tell them much about the doctrines of salvation.”²⁴ Conservative forces in the Church ousted Jones not for his “Unitary” views and practices against Presbyterian religious doctrine, the article declared, but rather because of his social agenda. Finally, in an interview for the Southern Oral History Project, Jones and his wife both agreed that race was the primary reason for the trial and was Chairman Patterson’s original motivation for conducting the investigation.²⁵ From the perspective of the defendants, the trial had always centered on the issue of race rather than questions of Presbyterian doctrine.

Similarly, conservatives in the church who supported the commission

21 Pryor, *Faith, Grace and Heresy*, 134.

22 Questionnaire, December 13, 1945, box 1, folder 1, Charles M. Jones Papers.

23 Charles M. Jones, “A statement by Charles M. Jones,” 10.

24 “Pastor v Presbytery.” *Time Magazine*, 61, issue 8, 55.

25 Charles M. Jones and Dorcas Jones, interviewed by John Egerton, SOHPC, Interview A-0335,

during the trial cited race as the problem around which the trial was fixed. One former church member believed that “there are some people who are foolish enough as to try and change God’s laws in regard races.” She then stated that she hoped the commission “will use your influence in ridding the Presbyterian Church and our State of these aliens who would destroy us.”²⁶ Those conservatives eventually prevailed, securing Jones’s resignation. Though the Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church could not stop blacks from joining—the larger Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) was in the process of passing a desegregation policy in 1953—the Church abandoned Jones’s project of active integration.²⁷

Such socially motivated actions were not uncommon in southern churches during the twentieth century. Racial conflicts sparked conflicts throughout the South, primarily along liberal and conservative lines. Racial integration of the Presbyterian Church had been a project of many ministers from the time of the Civil War.²⁸ Judging from the rhetoric of sermons, southern ministers indeed became more liberal in their politics over the course of the century.²⁹ In fact, Jones fought alongside another minister who also faced criticism and the prospect of dismissal from his parish. Robert Seymour, a Baptist preacher, felt isolated by the rest of the North Carolina Baptist community before accepting an invitation to lead UNC-CH’s church. Though Seymour never faced a trial, the Southern Baptist Convention deemed that he was only concerned with the issue of race, which did not concern the church.³⁰ While Chapel Hill’s public spaces were still mostly racially segregated, a problem that Seymour and Jones would both later tackle, the university provided Seymour with enough freedom to continue his integration project.

In an instance that more closely parallels the experience of Jones, the Methodist Court of Appeals found Thomas Butts of First Methodist Church

26 D.M. Lucas to Charles M. Jones, April 11, 1952, box 1, folder 2, Charles M. Jones Papers.

27 David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 107-108.

28 Nibs Stroupe and Inez Fleming, *While We Run This Race: Confronting the Power of Racism in a Southern Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1995), 10.

29 Beverly Zink, “Themes in Southern Presbyterian Preaching, 1920-1983,” in *The Confessional Mosaic: Presbyterians and the Twentieth-Century Theology*, Milton Coalter, John Mulder, and Louis Weeks, eds. (Louisville: Westminster and John Knox Press, 1990), 110.

30 Elaine A. Lechtreck, “Southern White Ministers and the Civil Rights Movement.” (PhD diss., Union Institute and University, 2007), 84.



In debates over integration, many conservative Presbyterians referenced the biblical story of Ham, who was cursed by his father, Noah. This story was used as a justification for slavery and white supremacy well into the twentieth century. (Image by Gustave Doré, courtesy of Wikimedia.)

of Montgomery guilty of undermining the ministry of an associate in 1980.³¹ While Butts's case occurred nearly half a century after Jones's, his trial and conviction followed a similar pattern. His trial came only months after Butts admitted the first black member to the church since 1860, to which a former state senator responded, "I'll get you for taking a nigger into this

31 Ibid.

church.”³² Though he eventually had the decision overturned, Butts was unable to secure another preaching position in Alabama after his trial. Butts’s trial devastated his social project even more than Jones’s, as he never had the same platform from which to preach social equality between races as Jones found in the nondenominational church he would eventually lead.³³ By the early twentieth century, a clear pattern had emerged in which southern ministers would be condemned or even expelled by the national Church structure for fighting for civil rights.

The Spirituality of the Church

Southern churches created a system that allowed them to ignore social justice projects by refocusing on the so-called “spirituality of churches.” Indeed, according to Reverend Joel L. Alvis Jr., those who advocated for the “so-called Southern Presbyterian Church” believed it should be “an institution concerned only with ‘spiritual’ affairs” and should remain a “separate entity.” This separation of spiritual and social affairs came to be known as “the spirituality of the church.”³⁴ The spirituality of the church served as a cover to obfuscate practices that worked against social justice projects. For example, one Mississippi minister argued that Jesus himself “did not seek social reform, but salvation of sinners,” a line that, according to historian David L. Chappell, became a “mantra for segregationist Presbyterians.”³⁵ These Presbyterians, who generally came from white middle-class families, did not necessarily hold segregationist views out of malice, but instead out of a belief that, through state actions like the integration of the army, social justice had already come for all races and full integration was unnecessary.³⁶ Despite this, racial conflicts sparked the change that shook the American Presbytery Church for years to come.

The PCUS distinguished between those who followed the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, generally conservatives, and those who did not, generally liberals. A sharp divide on integration formed between liberals and conservatives, with both viewpoints using important,

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Alvis, *Religion and Race*, 46.

³⁵ Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*, 122.

³⁶ Robert S. Ellwood, *1950: Crossroads of American Religious Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 110-111.

far-reaching publications such as the *Presbyterian Outlook* to cite different parts of the Bible in support of their positions. Conservatives latched onto the stories of Ham and the tower of Babel, while liberals cited Isaiah's assertions that all who worship God will be welcomed into eternal peace.³⁷ Because of this divide within the Church, presbyteries varied widely on their responses to racial integration while still maintaining an appeal to traditions and scripture.

Orange Presbytery pushed Jones out not explicitly based on his views on race, but through coded language based on biblical and doctrinal appeals. Because the PCUS was passing a desegregation policy at the time of Jones's trial, the Orange Presbytery had strong reason to hide their true intentions, lest they be seen to be acting in defiance of the larger Church structure.³⁸ Such actions were not uncommon amongst presbyteries, as Presbyterians often led the charge in conservative religious movements for segregationist projects as part of larger conservative projects.³⁹

The language used in Jones's trial appealed to the spirituality of the Church and Presbyterianism as an institution, claiming that the specific beliefs of the Presbyterian denomination should be more important than broad Christian ideology. The commission found fault with Jones's church because his congregation believed "it is more important to be Christian than to be a Presbyterian" and called for his resignation, as "the interests of religion imperatively demand it."⁴⁰ These claims about the welfare of the church contradicted the actual will of the congregation. Though there were some members who left the church for undisclosed—though perhaps implied—reasons, the majority of the church members fully supported Jones.⁴¹ In fact, over the first few years of Jones's tenure for which data is available, membership grew substantially: between 1940 and 1945 the church grew from 171 to 223 members.⁴² The welfare of the church as mentioned in the trial must have referred to what the Orange Presbytery perceived to be the best interests of the Church as an institution. Such a judgment, though, would still have been difficult for the commission to

37 Alvis, *Religion and Race*, 47.

38 *Ibid.*, 107-108.

39 David Torbett, "Race and Conservative Protestantism: Princeton Theological Seminary and the Unit of the Human Species," *Fides et Historia* 37, no. 2 (2005): 119.

40 Charles M. Jones, "A statement by Charles M. Jones," 14, 4.

41 A.H. Shepard to Charles M. Jones, April 11, 1945, box 1, folder 2, Charles M. Jones Papers.

42 "Church in Action," March 1945, box 1, folder 1, Charles M. Jones Papers.

fairly evaluate, as no one in the commission ever attended one of Jones's sermons.⁴³ These conservative judgments passed on Jones derived not from his sermons, but from the commission's perception of Jones's political actions outside the church.

Conservative Critiques

Jones's critics within the community provide a more direct link between Presbyterian theological conservatism and social conservatism. For example, an anonymous critic explained in a letter to a member of the Orange Presbytery that "this poor little Chapel Hill Church" was "going from bad to worse" because of Jones's desire for "social equality among the races." Jones's supporters, according to this critic, were not "real Presbyterians," since they had not been "brought up" in the Church and had not been raised in the South.⁴⁴ The writer appeals to several different common themes in the letters that Jones received during his trial. Like many, this critic first looked upon racial equality as a harm to society. Indeed, while many people in the Chapel Hill community accepted and even embraced his project, as evidenced by the increasing numbers of his congregation, those who did not often explicitly complained in private letters to Jones.

The writer then claimed that Jones's allies were neither "real" Presbyterians nor true Southerners, connecting Presbyterianism with segregation. The call to Presbyterianism shows that the writer believed his denomination to be particularly against the social equality of the races. Such an argument reflects the conservative side of the Presbyterian Church, supported by appeals to the spirituality of the church. Presbyterianism, in the anonymous critic's view, had no business trying to bring about integration and should solely focus on religious affairs. Calls to focus on religion alone often rested on the professed belief that God would fix any social ills on Earth and that people should only focus on the "salvation of the self" rather than saving everyone or making their communities better for all peoples.⁴⁵ Finally, the writer expresses concern over losing church

43 Charles M. Jones, "A statement by Charles M. Jones," 5.

44 Charles G. Rose to E.E. Gillespie, May 26, 1944, box 1, folder 1, Charles M. Jones Papers.

45 Walter H. Conser Jr. and Robert J. Cain, *Presbyterians in North Carolina: Race, Politics, and Religious Identity in Historical Perspective* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012), 195.



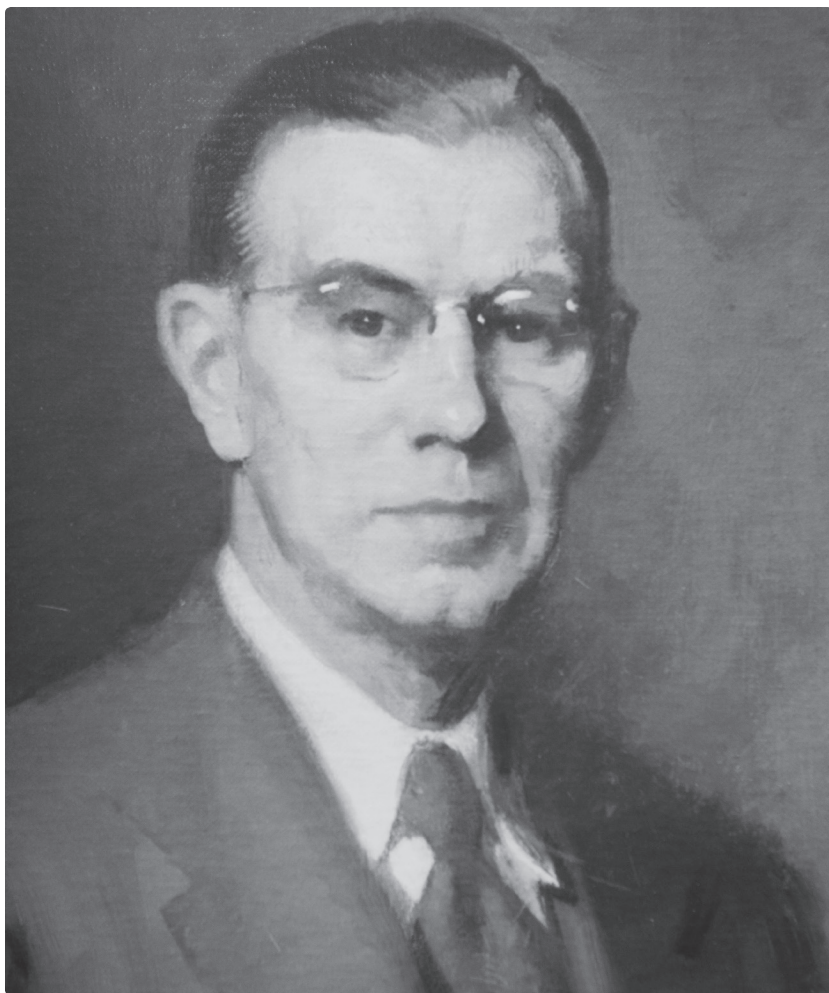
White churchgoers had a variety of different opinions on the appropriate role of the Church in resolving social issues. Here churchgoers gather for Sunday service at the First Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill in the 1950s. The church's membership grew substantially during Jones's tenure, despite the misgivings of the broader church leadership.

(Photo courtesy of Mark Pryor.)

members, even though Jones's position had had little negative effect on the church's overall membership. This concern can be seen as a call for maintaining the current state of the church, an all-white congregation with conservative politics.

Critics appealing to the spirituality of the Church further alleged that Jones misused religion for his own personal gain. In doing so, they constructed a narrow and "idealized" version of Presbyterianism and Christianity as a whole. Church elder Walter Reece Berryhill believed that Jones supported "essentially evil enterprises which are given a false atmosphere of holiness through the unrighteous use of Christian phraseology in an unworthy cause" and attempted a "wide-spread effort to stir up the Negroes."⁴⁶ For Berryhill, religion was not meant to interfere with social projects. He deemed Jones's project "evil," indicating that integration was an act against God. In his view, using religion for these unworthy causes was a misuse of Jones's power as a minister. Berryhill evoked images of true and false holiness: if there was a false atmosphere of holiness, there must have been a true one by contrast. This true

46 W.R. Berryhill to Charles M. Jones, September 21, 1944, box 1, folder 1, Charles M. Jones Papers.



Walter Reece Berryhill, MD, was one of many congregants who lambasted Jones's efforts to integrate his church. Berryhill, who denounced Jones's project as an "evil enterprise," served as dean of the UNC-CH School of Medicine from 1941 to 1964. (*Photo courtesy of UNC-Chapel Hill.*)

atmosphere necessarily excluded social equality for blacks due to its alleged "evilness," meaning that it must necessarily exclude blacks from white churches, as they could not participate in this true church. As Berryhill constructed this idea of true uses of religion, he constructed a true religion that separated blacks from whites, forcing blacks into black churches and away from white spaces.

Other conservatives expressed these concerns to a wider audience

in an attempt to garner support against Jones. W.C. George wrote to the *Chapel Hill Weekly* in July, 1944, asserting that “the race problem is not a religious one; it is ... social-biological.” He continued, “The problem being what it is, the essentially evil implications of recent inter-racial goings-on are recognized and deplored by many of our people.”⁴⁷ Like Berryhill, George denied the religious nature of the “race problem” while condemning integration as an act against God.

Furthermore, by denying the religious aspect of racial integration and appealing to science, George re-asserted the notion of a hierarchy of races. He claimed that blacks could not interact with whites due to the fact that they are “biologically” inferior. By writing this letter to the community newspaper, George attempted to galvanize the community against Jones, citing the “many” people who already deplored his actions. This public act furthered the ideas that the church was not the venue for considering social questions and that blacks should be excluded from certain churches in the community.

Conservatives who appealed to the spirituality of the church often accused Jones of having a secret agenda for social equality between races. In a letter to Jones on December 20, 1945, David Clark, a resident of Chapel Hill, denounced Jones’s practices. “You tried to influence young people to accept your personal ideas of the question of social equality with Negroes,” Clark declared, “by making a pretense that it was a religious question.” Clark insisted that “the public would take no such view” and did not share Jones’s advocacy for “social equality.” Clark pointedly accused Jones of being “not honest enough to be willing to let the public know your position.”⁴⁸

By portraying the struggle between conservatives and liberals within the Presbyterian Church as a struggle between true Christians interested in religious questions and people using their power within the church to influence others, conservatives like Clark argued that Jones’s actions should be a question of religious or non-religious intent rather than one of wrong or right. By reframing Presbyterian liberals as people who ignored the real questions of the church and influencing “young people,” conservatives thus deplored social progress within a religious context and painted liberals as

47 W.C. George to *Chapel Hill Weekly*, July 25, 1944, box 1, folder 23, Charles M. Jones Papers.

48 David Clark to Charles M. Jones, December 20, 1945, box 1, folder 2, Charles M. Jones Papers.

degenerates, much in the way that conservatives portrayed Communists at the time. Indeed, liberal Christians faced accusations of a political nature as well as the charges of religious corruption that Clark made in this letter.

In Jones's defenses against his critics, he often claimed that he did not have any political motivations. Jones shared a lengthy exchange with a resident of Chapel Hill, C.R. Davant, who strongly opposed Jones's integration project. A self-described "conservative Presbyterian" and "southerner," Davant wrote Jones in an initial letter, "God knows I hate to see it and I know that it is not right in the sight of God, I have always been taught and firmly believe that no white person is the peer of a black, unless he or she admits that equality."⁴⁹ While Davant is rather general in his criticisms of Jones's project, he alludes to racial equality as being against God's wishes, an opinion likely justified through the idea of Ham's curse on the Tower of Babel.⁵⁰ Jones responded in two ways. He first declared that he was "not a Communist, Socialist or New Dealer."⁵¹ Though Davant did not indicate that he believed Jones to have ulterior political motivations, Jones responded with a political defense. Jones may have offered this preemptive defense against questions of his political motivation because he needed to seem less liberal in the eyes of Davant and other conservatives to gain any sort of credibility. By declaring that he was not a leftist, Jones attempted to distance himself from politics, thus playing into the same doctrine of spirituality of the church to which conservatives clung so fiercely.

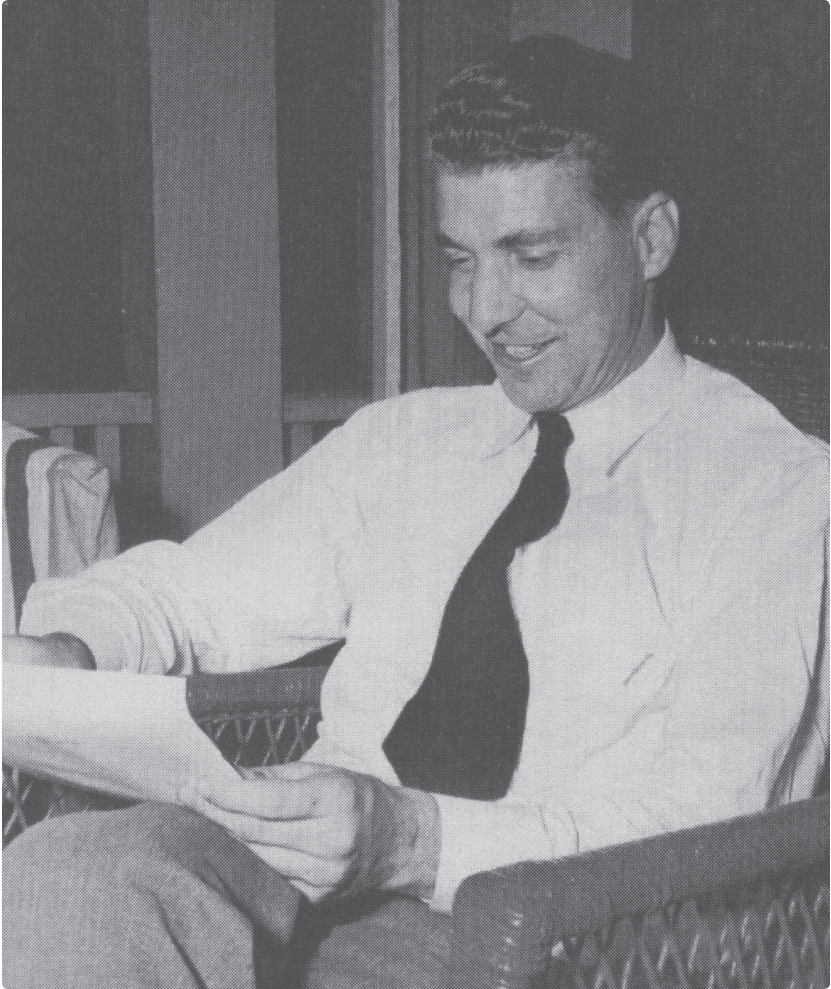
Jones claimed in his letter to Davant that racial equality *was* a religious issue, indeed, one that God clearly would support. He asserted that Jesus "proclaimed God as the Father of all mankind, and men as brothers; when he refused to recognize circumstances of birth, as barriers to fellowship and friendship; when and even their enemies; when He called His disciples to walk as he walked, then feel it laid upon me to do so."⁵² Because the Bible declared that all men ought to be equal, Jones felt this proved that racial equality was inherent in Christian religious doctrine. These appeals echo the larger appeals that liberal Presbyterians made in supporting

49 C.R. Davant to Charles M. Jones, January 23, 1943, box 1, folder 2, Charles M. Jones Papers.

50 Conser Jr. and Cain, *Presbyterians in North Carolina*, 197.

51 Charles M. Jones to C.R. Davant, February 3, 1943, box 1, folder 2, Charles M. Jones Papers.

52 Charles M. Jones to C.R. Davant, February 20, 1943, box 1, folder 2, Charles M. Jones Papers.



Rev. Charles M. Jones insisted that the basic principles of Christianity should take precedent over institutional authority. (*Photo courtesy of Mark Pryor.*)

desegregation: instead of focusing on specific stories, liberals cited the Bible's broader principles. While it seems from Davant's subsequent letters that Jones never could persuade him of a religious and nonpolitical duty to promote racial equality, Jones's supporters during the trial and, indeed, liberal Presbyterians everywhere, often used these arguments.

The Liberal Response

While conservatives focused on limiting the scope of Church activism through the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, liberal Presbyterians often focused on the Social Gospel, citing the Bible as a source of social progress. Liberals were reformers who sought to combine social ills, such as race relations and poverty, with religious questions, creating a theological and political project known as the Social Gospel.⁵³ Indeed, for liberals, “the ‘spirituality of the church’ was irrelevant at best, a heresy at worst. They instead pursued the sanctification of politics, envisioning religious ideas as central to achieving a more just order for ordinary southerners, white and black.”⁵⁴ As Jones did in his letter to Davant, liberals often cited verses of the Bible that spoke to equality rather than the Old Testament stories that conservatives tended to cite. These discrepancies made the letters of support that Jones received, usually liberal in nature, much different in tone and religious imagery than letters from conservatives.

In contrast to conservatives who seem to have been divided on either demanding the separation between church and social issues or citing the Bible as a source for white supremacy, liberals generally united around claiming Christian duty above Presbyterian doctrine and promoting the Social Gospel. In fact, Jones looked to other Christian leaders for sources of inspiration on preaching the Social Gospel. In a letter to J.M. Waggett, a minister who led the Adult Bible Class of South Carolina, Jones noted, “The Presbyterian of the South for May 10th carried an announcement of the action of the Adult Bible Class condemning the ‘white supremacy’ legislation session of the legislators of South Carolina. I am sure such action would not have been possible without pastoral leadership and preaching of a high Christian order.” He continued, “I wish more of us were able to instill in our people the mind and spirit of Christ.”⁵⁵ By conflating Christ’s message and the condemnation of white supremacy, Jones indicated that Christianity had an important place in projects promoting social justice. Indeed, he believed that the only way forward in the fight for racial justice was through religious leadership and institutions.

53 Glenda E. Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1960* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 87.

54 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 at Chapel Hill Press, 2005), 47.

55 Charles M. Jones to J.M. Waggett, May 17, 1944, box 1, folder 2, Charles M. Jones Papers.

Jones's supporters toed the line between political and religious movements, often citing a religious basis for political actions. Such arguments stood in sharp contrast to most. A letter from Kenneth Walter Cameron on October 3, 1944, spoke to the loose distinction for liberals between political and religious contexts. Cameron began his letter by addressing the political implications of racial justice, asserting, "A rumor came to me recently about some difficulty prevailing in your little parish about your views on pacifism and war. I went straightway to Ed King to learn the truth of the matter, and discovered that the smoke and flame concerns the Christian attitude towards our brothers who differ from us only in the trivial matter of pigmentation."⁵⁶ While the commission investigating Jones never mentioned his pacifism or stances on war within the trial, conservatives, including the chair of the commission, clearly believed that Jones was too liberal for the Presbyterian Church. Any arguments against Jones's theology, Cameron argued, were just a smokescreen to hide a reactionary effort to maintain the status quo. Indeed, Cameron argued, like many other liberal supporters of Jones, that the "Christian attitude" required looking past race.

Cameron's letter illustrates how Jones's actions outside of the Church may have angered conservatives further. During his trial, Jones worked only every other Sunday in Chapel Hill. He started working for the Save the Children Foundation at this time, in eastern Tennessee where he lived and worked, to improve the educational conditions in small rural schools.⁵⁷ Orange Presbytery thought his leave was poorly timed but granted him the absence. Jones's supporters, however, believed wholly in his mission to improve education in predominantly black communities. Cameron argued in his letter to Jones that education for blacks was of the utmost importance: "I know, as you so well do, the tremendous problems facing this fair and fruitful segment of giving the remainder of my life to Negro education. Always, however, after such a thought comes the inevitable revelation that the education is chiefly needed by us whites."⁵⁸ Again, Cameron bolstered his belief in racial equality with religious language, declaring that whites were the problem and needed a "revelation" to treat blacks better. He

56 Kenneth Walter Cameron to Charles M. Jones, October 3, 1944, box 1, folder 2, Charles M. Jones Papers.

57 Pryor, *Faith, Grace and Heresy*, 148.

58 Kenneth Walter Cameron to Charles M. Jones.



In 2009, the Town of Chapel Hill dedicated the Peace and Justice Plaza to local advocates for civil justice, including Rev. Jones. (Photo by Maximilian Conley.)

further used religious imagery in his declaration of “fruitful giving,” showing that education for blacks is not only justified but also mandated by Christian doctrine. Despite critics citing Jones’s education project as another reason he was not devoted enough to the Church, his supporters saw his actions as paramount to a Christian way of life.

Cameron’s letter further illustrates the different ways that liberals invoked religious imagery. He noted “that the Christian road is a hard one and that the South is going to crucify many of its heroes and saviors before justice is done.” He continued, “What you have been able to do already in Chapel Hill will outlive the town itself and become a veritable phoenix that will rise again from its own ashes.... You will be needed in the Kingdom more and more in the difficult post-war years.”⁵⁹ Instead of clinging to specific Presbyterian doctrine, liberals, including Cameron, referred to general Christian symbols, such as the crucifixion, resurrection, and the Kingdom of Heaven. All three images also refer to sources of good within Christianity as opposed to evil. The crucifixion represents the ultimate charitable act, the resurrection illustrates the potential for salvation, and the Kingdom represents the perfect reward for living as a good Christian. These stand in sharp contrast to conservatives’ use of language, describing

59 Ibid.

the evil committed by Ham and the separation caused by the Tower of Babel. Furthermore, unlike many of the conservative arguments for segregation, these themes run throughout the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments, while the conservative arguments tended to focus around stories from the Old Testament. Indeed, this divide represents the larger ideologies of both groups: conservatives sought to look at strict readings of particular sources of religious doctrine, and liberals pulled from more general Biblical principles that had a more universal appeal.

Most of Jones's supporters rested their arguments on the idea that Christianity was more important than Presbyterianism. For example, Mrs. W.T. Haywood wrote to Jones that she hoped that students "will not think that it's useless to try to be an understanding tolerant Christian, seeing how you have been treated.... I have prayed about this and that a victory would point to Christianity not Presbyterianism. I can't see how it can help out demonization."⁶⁰ Haywood pointed to Christianity first as the provider of answers to these questions of social equality. She believed that "tolerant Christians" like Jones would provide the future direction for the church. She also disagreed with the demonization of Jones and other liberals.

Bill Wells, a minister from a nearby church, also supported Jones's alliances. He wrote, "I must say that I think you are completely guilty of putting Christianity above Presbyterianism. You mean a great deal to others of us who are trying to live as Christians."⁶¹ Though Wells also operated under the Church structure, he too followed the liberal doctrine of putting Christianity above Presbyterianism. The solidarity Wells expressed shows that, despite the larger conservative Presbytery, other ministers were uncomfortable with the direction in which the Presbytery was moving. His support indicates that the seemingly unified front that Orange Presbytery presented against Jones did not represent all members of the Presbytery. In fact, others were just as liberal and just as likely to look past specific Presbyterian doctrine. Haywood and Wells, along with other liberals of the time, clearly believed that the Presbyterian doctrine that the Orange Presbytery pushed was not a true Christian doctrine.

60 W.T. Haywood to Charles M. Jones, February 26, 1952, box 1, folder 2, Charles M. Jones Papers.

61 Bill Wells to Charles M. Jones, December 5, 1952, box 1, folder 2, Charles M. Jones Papers.

Jones's Response

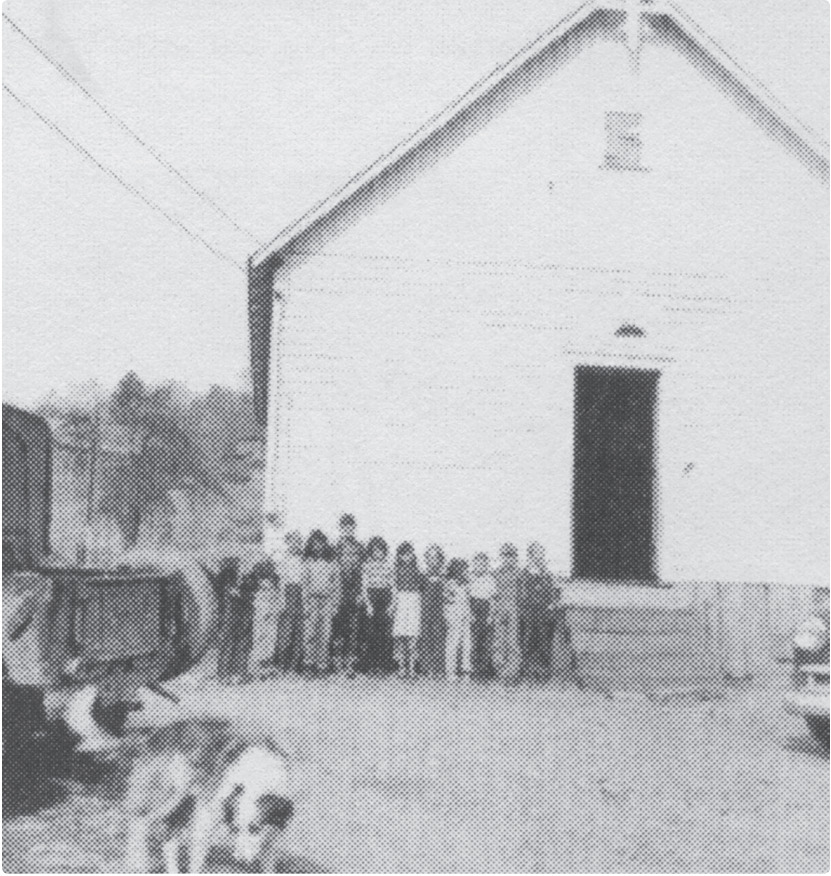
In one of the few examples of Jones speaking on his own behalf, he asserted that Christianity as a whole was more important than specific Presbyterian doctrine, just as many of his supporters had done. Jones rarely spoke about his trial in his letters. He did so even less so during the trial because he was generally in the countryside working with the Save the Children Foundation. For this reason, there is a gap in his letters and writings from the period of his trial. While it is difficult to determine if he chose to speak about his trial infrequently or if the information available is simply incomplete, one of the few existing sources of Jones's feelings about the trial is his statement declaring his withdrawal from the Church. In the last section of his resignation, Jones stated, "I believe a Christian's prime loyalty is to God as we know Him through Jesus Christ and not to any institution as such. But insofar as a Christian has ties of loyalty to institutions, I believe his first loyalty is not to his denomination but to the Church Universal, the ongoing movement of followers of Jesus Christ."⁶² Just like his supporters, Jones latched onto the conception of Jesus as a moral agent as opposed to the stricter, more conservative Biblical stories. Jones's words clarify this position strongly, arguing that Christians ought to consider their devotion to God first and foremost. He appeals to the idea of the apostles, or "followers," who had no loyalty but to Jesus. In Jones's Christian theology, following an institution before the teachings of Jesus counters the teachings of Jesus and his followers. This argument follows many liberals' appeals to Paul's vision of "the body of Christ, with many members."⁶³ Jones's words thus reflected the rest of the liberal movement in the Presbyterian Church, despite his claims to be politically moderate.

Even more than his supporters, Jones's resignation speech argued that Orange Presbytery overstepped Christianity as a whole. He asserted that "the fundamental truths of the Christian faith are held by most denominations. There is no distinctive Presbyterian doctrine." Instead, he insisted that "Presbyterians have a distinctive historical emphasis.... It is more important to be Christian than Presbyterian, for denominations are means and not ends."⁶⁴ Jones went beyond most liberals by arguing that

62 Charles M. Jones, "A statement by Charles M. Jones," 14.

63 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

64 Charles M. Jones, "A statement by Charles M. Jones," 14.



A one-room school in the countryside that Jones visited while working with the Save the Children Foundation in 1953. Jones's supporters believed wholly in his mission to improve education in predominantly black communities. *(Photo courtesy of Mark Pryor.)*

there is no specific denominational doctrine and that all Christians were fundamentally the same. It follows, then, that Jones believed the presbytery was acting outside the authority of Christianity as a whole by appealing to Presbyterians specifically. His accusation of the “historical emphasis” may indeed be an argument for the inherent conservatism of Presbyterianism, as the conservative religious arguments of the time primarily used a historical lens to adhere to the way the religion had “always” been practiced. Jones then argued that denominationalism split Christianity as a whole, as each denomination claimed to be the true church. Just as many other liberals of the time argued, Jones believed that such splintering hurt all Christians and was not what Jesus and his followers preached. The “ends” to which Jones

referred are the united Christian movement that liberals envisioned, both between different denominations and between whites and blacks. These arguments represent the most liberal arguments made during Jones's trial, posed by Jones himself.

The Church's Ideological Divide

Charles Jones's trial provides a unique lens into the practical implications of Presbyterian doctrine in the South before and during the civil rights movement. Because PCUS constricted presbyteries by banning segregation, Orange Presbytery could not officially act against Jones because of his integrationist projects. Instead, they needed to punish and critique him in code, though most people involved saw through the appeals to Presbyterian doctrine. Indeed, this represents a larger movement in southern churches. As larger church organizations, whether it be Presbytery, Baptist, or Methodist, moved toward integration policies, ministers who followed these rules and integrated their churches were often forced out. Jones's case demonstrates how such a removal could happen and the response from the public when it did.

The public response to Jones's trial showed the sharp divide within the Presbyterian Church between liberals and conservatives. Both sides used the Bible to advance their agendas, but conservatives clung to ideas of the spirituality of the Church while liberals attempted to advance Social Gospels. The appeals that both parties made followed distinct patterns. Conservatives tended to appeal to the "evil" of integration, invoking Old Testament stories. They also appealed to strict doctrinal readings that precluded the Church from investing in social projects. Liberals, in contrast, sought to further social justice because they believed that God dictated the Social Gospel. They appealed to images of good and promise, particularly in Jesus's teachings, and believed that Christianity held more importance than Presbyterianism. Indeed, even today, religious language is a powerful tool in social justice movements and fights for racial equality. Though Jones began his project early in the civil rights movement, these uses of the Bible and denominational doctrine continued to serve liberals and conservatives throughout the twentieth century. Jones's trial provides a glimpse into the language of good and evil in the fight for racial equality in religious contexts.