WILLIAM J. McGLOTHLIN: PROGRESSIVE CHURCHMAN AND EDUCATIONAL STATESMAN

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The Progressive Era is at once one of the most restless, yet fertile periods in American history. Encompassing the years from 1889, when Jane Addams opened Hull House in Chicago, to the end of World War I, Progressivism was a wide-ranging movement for reform in reaction to the rise of the Industrial Revolution and the corruption and excesses of the Gilded Age. Its leaders belonged to the post-Civil War generation; they were generally Protestant, middle class, and well-educated. They dedicated themselves with religious fervor to the revival of Protestant morality, the restoration of competition in business, and the renewal of democracy in America. Education became one of the major weapons in their arsenal of reform. In politics and religion Progressivism cut across the lines of party and denomination. Of the three Progressive presidents, for example, two were Republican – Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft – and one was Democratic – Woodrow Wilson. Progressive leaders seldom agreed with one another on any issue except the need for reform itself. Indeed, Progressivism has been sometimes described not so much as a movement but as a creative moment in American history. It provided not only immediate changes in the nation's fabric, but it also provided the vision for subsequent reform during the remainder of the twentieth century. [1]

Because Protestantism was at the heart of the reform effort, Progressive leaders within the Protestant denominations sought to address the major intellectual challenges of the day - such as Darwinian evolution and the historical-critical study of the Bible – as well as the profound changes taking place in American society. Those efforts are generally known as the development of liberal theology and the emergence of the social gospel. [2]

In the South white Protestants overwhelmingly identified with three evangelical groups – Southern Baptists, Southern Methodists,

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and Southern Presbyterians. Because of the devastation of the Civil War, the intellectual and social conservatism of the region, the continuing impact of the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, and the smaller, educated middle class, Progressivism among white religious leaders in the South was more conservative than in the rest of the nation and more limited in scope. [3]

One of the strong Progressive voices in religion in the South was William Joseph McGlothlin, professor of church history in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1894-1919), president of Furman University from the end of World War I to the beginning of the New Deal (1919-1933), and president of the Southern Baptist Convention (1930-1932). [4]

McGlothlin was descended from fierce Scottish Presbyterians who supported Bonnie Prince Charlie in the '45 (that is, the Rising of 1745). These members of the Clan Lachlan later fled to Ireland, where they became McLachlans. Eventually some of their descendants joined the Scots-Irish immigration to America. When Joseph McGlothlin was born on November 29, 1867, his family lived on a small tobacco farm in northern Tennessee, near Gallatin and Portland. Young Joe, as he was known, was the eldest of three children. The family was Presbyterian, and the stern theological doctrines of election and providence were staples in the McGlothlin household. The Civil War was over, and much of the South had been devastated. Tennessee had been a divided state during the war, and an East Tennessee Unionist – Andrew Johnson – was in the White House. [5]

As a boy Joe McGlothlin helped build the first schoolhouse in the community. When it was completed, he walked the three miles each way to and from school. Later he boarded ten miles from home in order to attend the nearest high school. After four and a half months he began teaching elementary school as well as attending high school. During this period he attended a protracted meeting (or revival) in the elementary school conducted by a Baptist minister. He had a deep religious experience and was converted to the Baptist way.

In 1887, at the age of nineteen, McGlothlin entered Bethel College, a Baptist institution in Russellville, Kentucky. He fired

furnaces to put himself through school, and despite his spotty preparation he graduated in two years by doubling the amount of Greek he took each year. Between his first and second years of college he strongly felt a call to the ministry. In the summer of 1888 he listened as an unschooled preacher attempted to deliver a sermon. This experience led McGlothlin to conclude: "The gospel is worthy of a better presentation." He would enter the ministry, but not without a seminary education.

After two years of teaching English and mathematics in the academy at Bardstown, Kentucky, he entered the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville in the fall of 1891. In many ways it was a golden era in the history of the seminary. The faculty was stellar. President John A. Broadus was an internationally known preacher and professor of homiletics, and A. T. Robertson was equally well known in New Testament studies. William H. Whitsitt, a young scholar who had studied at Berlin and Leipzig, was establishing his reputation as a church historian. McGlothlin was an outstanding student. He had no sooner received his Th.M. degree in 1894 than he was offered the position of Assistant Instructor of Old Testament. [6]

It was a heady time for Joe McGlothlin, but also a traumatic period for the young instructor and the entire seminary. When W. H. Whitsitt became president after the death of Broadus, he angered a substantial number of conservatives who were out to gain control of the Southern Baptist Convention. These adherents of the Landmark movement, as it was called, insisted that Baptists had existed in unbroken succession from the first century and had always practiced baptism by immersion. Whitsitt published the results of his research indicating that present-day Baptists had emerged from English Puritanism in the seventeenth century and had not always insisted on immersion. In the end, Whitsitt was vindicated by the seminary trustees, but he resigned to restore peace to the denomination. E. Y. Mullins became president of the seminary in 1899. As a theologian, Mullins became a major Progressive figure. He attempted to reconcile religion with Darwinian thought, to nudge Baptists further toward the doctrine of free will and away from predestination, and to combine the Baptist emphases on religious liberty and the priesthood

of the believer in what he called the doctrine of soul competency. [7]

In the wake of Whitsitt's departure, McGlothlin suddenly found himself teaching church history in place of his old professor. To prepare himself for his new task, he travelled to the University of Berlin and became a doctoral student of Adolf Harnack, a major theologian and perhaps the best known church historian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From Harnack, McGlothlin learned that Christian doctrine was shaped as much by social forces as by the elaboration of Greek philosophical thought. His mentor in Berlin encouraged him to search for the essentials of Christian doctrine rather than focus on the elaboration of dogma. McGlothlin's dissertation was a study of the origins of the Anabaptist movement in Bern, Switzerland, in the sixteenth century. He received the Ph.D. degree from the University of Berlin in 1902.

McGlothlin's years on the faculty in Louisville were filled with both teaching and writing. He was the author of half a dozen books, including *Baptist Confessions of Faith* and his *magnum opus*, *The Course of Christian History*, which was published by MacMillan in 1917 after it was turned down as too liberal by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

McGlothlin's theological views are outlined in an address he made to the Baptist Ministers' Conference in Louisville on December 27, 1906, entitled "What is Essential Baptist Doctrine? - An Inquiry." They form a synthesis of the thought of Harnack, his mentor at Berlin, with the warm-hearted revivalism of the Southern evangelical frontier. This synthesis marks McGlothlin, along with his faculty colleague and former roommate, William O. Carver, as the more liberal members of the seminary faculty. [8]

In his address McGlothlin indicated that no authoritative statement of Baptist doctrine could be derived from the history of Baptists because there were many diverse groups that had used the term Anabaptist or Baptist since the sixteenth century. Nor did the historic Baptist confessions agree on many doctrinal points. For example, some were Arminian (free will), some were Calvinist (predestinarian), and others took moderating positions. In the present (1906) the confusion was equally as great, because there was a wide diversity of opinion. "We have wisely left large liberty," he said, "to

individual peculiarities, provincial differences, church freedom, etc., trusting that personal religion and loyalty to the Bible would preserve a reasonable amount of harmony and fellowship." [9]

McGlothlin proposed reducing any required confession to a short statement, and he urged churches to be careful to distinguish between heresy and the struggle of every generation to restate Christian teachings in meaningful ways. His view of "essential Baptist doctrine" required of believers was simple: "I have repented of my sins and believe that God has forgiven my sins for the sake of Christ whom I am trusting for life and salvation; I desire to be baptized (immersed in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) and promise to lead a life devoted to Christ and his cause." [10]

Such a confession, McGlothlin proposed, did not, for example, deal with the major theological debates of Christian history, such as the immanence or the transcendence of God, the doctrine of the Trinity nor the nature of Christ. It was neither Arminian nor Calvinist. Even in the ordination of ministers, he urged that "we should be slow to go very far beyond our primal creed and its implications. Unwavering fidelity in vital essentials and elsewhere liberty are the conditions of breadth, efficiency and harmony in our denomination and its work." [11]

Ironically, McGlothlin was formulating his own views at the same time that the emerging Fundamentalist movement was preparing to do battle with liberal theology, using the weapons of Biblical inerrancy and dispensationalism. [12]

Like many American churchmen of his generation, McGlothlin was caught up in the moral and religious crusade of World War I as "the war to end all wars." In fact, he was in Europe with his family on his way to Germany to do additional study in 1914 when the war erupted. They turned back in Switzerland and took the last train available to civilians from Interlachen to Paris on their way home to America. In his journal McGlothlin wrote: "Germany has simply become insufferable, and the world has risen to humble her. It will be a fearful struggle, bloody and enormously expensive."[13] When the United States entered the war in 1917, he adopted the Progressive stance of President Wilson that it was "a war to end all wars." At the time he noted: "We are now at war with the greatest

military power in the world . . . We must fight for democracy and freedom." [14]

Back in Louisville McGlothlin enlisted as a "four-minute man" to sell Liberty Bonds to support the war. When President Wilson appointed Herbert Hoover to set about the task of urging Americans to conserve food to aid those made homeless by the war in Europe, McGlothlin became the representative of the Southern Baptist Convention on the national Food Conservation Commission. To rally support among Baptists, he went on a three weeks' speaking tour across the South.

As his reputation grew, McGlothlin had a number of opportunities to leave the seminary. Several times he was contacted by the trustees of Furman University to replace President Edwin McNeill Poteat, who wished to fulfill his life-long dream of becoming a missionary to China. Finally, in 1919, McGlothlin was offered both the presidency of Furman and the position of secretary of the Education Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. He decided to make the move to Greenville. [15]

According to his journal, McGlothlin had ambitions to succeed Mullins as president of the seminary. However, he encountered growing hostility from Mullins and Robertson. What he does not tell us was supplied by his closest friend on the faculty, William O. Carver. In his unpublished "Recollections," Carver wrote: "After the World War the wide recognition of McGlothlin ... gradually developed tension between him and Mullins and Robertson." When McGlothlin approached his senior colleagues about the offer at Furman, both men courteously urged him to stay but by their tone of voice indicated they would not be sorry to see him go. McGlothlin confided to his journal: "It is a relief to be away from them." [16]

At Furman, McGlothlin was determined to create a liberal arts college of the first rank. It was a difficult assignment for a small Southern school, unaccredited and poorly financed. But the successful crusade in Europe had enlivened the Progressive spirit. Shortly after McGlothlin's arrival in Greenville, he undertook an ambitious program to build five new buildings--Geer Hall, a central heating plant, a gymnasium, a refectory, and an infirmary. He began

to enlarge the faculty and sought scholars, like himself, who held the Ph.D. degree. They included Frank Pool in religion, Eugene Gardner in modern languages, Sumner Ives in biology, Alfred T. Odell in English, and Delbert H. Gilpatrick in history. In 1921 the Furman Law School held its first classes. Funds came from the state Baptist convention, the Southern Education Board, and the alumni. McGlothlin began an active campaign to seek accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, which Furman received in 1924. [17]

Perhaps the longest-lasting achievement of the McGlothlin administration was something entirely out of the president's hands. It was the decision of James Buchanan Duke in 1924 to include Furman as one of the beneficiaries of The Duke Endowment. Not only did the Duke gift make it possible for the university to survive the Great Depression, but it allowed Furman to flourish in better days. To date (1997), The Duke Endowment has provided Furman in excess of $51.4 million in gifts and grants.

As president, McGlothlin found that college students were not always amenable to his wishes. When the new refectory was completed on campus, he decreed that coats must be worn to meals. Those who appeared coatless were turned away. Finally, there was a demonstration in front of the President's House at 3:00 a.m., but to no avail. The students retaliated by nicknaming the unyielding, bald headed president, Cueball. The name amused young Bill McGlothlin ---in full rebellion against his father – until the students began referring to the son as Little Cueball. The next spring when temperatures began to rise, students appeared in the refectory without their coats, and President Cueball said not a word in protest! [18]

McGlothlin's Progressivism was evident in his views on race relations. His son Bill remembered long afterward how his father chided him for a slang reference to a black man he encountered on the street in Louisville. The proper term of reference, the elder McGlothlin told his son was "colored gentleman." [19]

In Greenville McGlothlin invited the first black to address the Furman faculty and student body in chapel – Dr. George Washington Carver – on November 19, 1923. The president also became active with the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, an organization

with headquarters in Atlanta committed to improving race relations in the South. He served on the Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching that employed the sociologist Arthur Raper to make what became the classic study of lynching in the South. Raper later recalled his visit to McGlothlin's office in Greenville, expecting to find a white, conservative racist. Raper needed the support of the commission members to publish his study which defined lynching as mob violence. McGlothlin asked him only one question: "Are your facts correct?" When Raper assured him they were, McGlothlin replied: "Well, publish them." That was the end of the interview. [20]

Perhaps more volatile at the time among the Baptist constituency was the issue of Darwinian evolution. The controversy reached a climax nationally during the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925. When J. Frank Norris, the leader of the fundamentalists in the Southern Baptist Convention, introduced a resolution to require every faculty member in Baptist colleges to sign a pledge that he or she believed in the Biblical, not the evolutionary view of creation, McGlothlin and others killed the resolution on the ground that it violated the Baptist view of freedom of conscience. [21]

In addresses to Baptist Assembly meetings on the campus at Furman in the summers, McGlothlin attempted to reconcile the views of science and religion in a way that did justice to the claims of both. Eventually, however, McGlothlin was asked to state his views on evolution before the South Carolina Baptist Convention. From the platform he recalled that he had joined the faculty of the seminary at Louisville in 1894, had been interrogated about his beliefs, and had signed the Abstract of Principles - all to the satisfaction of President John A. Broadus and the faculty. "Brothers and sisters of the Convention," he said, "I have seen no reason to change those beliefs since that time." He was strongly applauded but avoided a direct answer to the question. McGlothlin's role in the denomination increased and reached its zenith in 1930 when he was elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention. He laid the groundwork for the first concurrent meeting of the Northern and Southern Baptist conventions in 1933. [22]

However, McGlothlin's efforts at Furman and his life ended on a tragic note. Nationally, the struggle over the League of Nations

exhausted the Progressive movement. In the South the advance of the boll weevil across the region brought economic devastation to the Cotton Kingdom. Depression in the South was a prelude to the Great Depression of 1929. At Furman, as elsewhere, the mode changed from expansion to survival. The new law school closed in 1926, and McGlothlin proposed a coordination of Furman and the Greenville Woman's College to save the university's sister institution. Then, while McGlothlin and his wife were on their way to Washington, D.C., to attend the Southern Baptist Convention in 1933, they were involved in a serious automobile accident. She was killed, and he lingered in the hospital a week before his death on May 28, 1933. In his last words to his family, he rehearsed his life story and recalled his ambition to leave the farm in Tennessee and make a difference in the world. He regretted that he had left much undone. "I don't feel triumphant, as I hoped I would," he said; "but I'm not afraid to die."[23] The life of William Joseph McGlothlin — scholar, churchman and educational leader — was a testament to the Progressive spirit of the age.

ENDNOTES

[1] There is a vast literature on Progressivism. A convenient summary is Robert M. Crunden, "Progressivism," in *The Reader's Companion to American History*, ed. by Eric Foner and John A Garrity (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1991), pp. 868-871.

The definitive treatment of the South in this period is Dewey W. Grantham, Jr., *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville, TN: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1983).

[2] The impact of Progressivism on American religion can be traced in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), especially ch. 4647.

[3] The term "evangelical" in this context refers to the affective nature of the conversion experience which was associated with the Second Great Awakening and remained common in the South. See Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977), *passim*. Unfortunately, there is no comparable volume for the South after the Civil War.

Evangelical, as it is often used in America today, has been adopted by groups that were identified as Fundamentalist in the Progressive era.

[4] Biographical sketches can be found in *Encyclopedia of Southern*

Baptists, 2 vols. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1958), 2: 1841-42, and Greenville (SC) *News*, May 29, 1933.

[5] Family reminiscences can be found in Norman W. Cox, "W. J. McGlothlin, Scholar and Teacher," *Review and Expositor* 39: 2 (April 1942), 151-60, and William J. McGlothlin, Jr., "Anecdotes From the Life of William Joseph McGlothlin, Sr., Seminary Professor and University President," a paper presented to the Conversation Club, Louisville, KY, Oct. 6, 1977. William J. McGlothlin Papers, Furman Univ. Library, Greenville, SC.

[6] William A. Mueller, *A History of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1959), pp. 143-210.

[7] Ibid.

[8] McGlothlin, *What is Essential Baptist Doctrine? An Inquiry* (Louisville, KY: C. T. Dearing Printing Co., n.d.). There is a copy in the SC Baptist Historical Collection, Furman Univ. Library.

[9] Ibid., p. 8.

[10] Ibid., p. 11.

[11] Ibid., p. 16.

[12] Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, ch. 48.

[13] William J. McGlothlin, Journal, p. 35. Copy in McGlothlin Papers, Furman Univ. Library.

[14] Ibid., pp. 113-14.

[15] McGlothlin, Journal, pp. 153-57.

[16] Ibid., pp. 157-58; William O. Carver, unpublished notes, cited in William J. McGlothlin, Jr., "Anecdotes," pp. 8-11.

[17] Alfred S.Reid, *Furman University: Toward a New Identity, 1925-1975* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 31-61 covers the McGlothlin years.

[18] McGlothlin, "Anecdotes," pp. 14-15.

[19] Ibid., p. 16.

[20] Greenville(SC) *News*, Nov. 20,1923; McGlothlin, "Anecdotes," pp. 15-16.

[21] McGlothlin, "Anecdotes," pp. 16-17.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., pp. 19-20.