

**SILENT OBSERVER OR SILENT PARTNER:
METHODISM AND THE TEXAS KU KLUX KLAN, 1921-1925**

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The first congregation of John Wesley, Methodist founder, consisted of five people, including one black.¹ Throughout American history the issue of race has divided communities, angered congregations, and confronted ministers. The Protestant clergy have responded in mixed ways to the social upheaval caused by the racial issue. Some condemned racism as evil while others remained silent.

In the south after 1865, the condemnation of racism invited retaliation by secret societies. One such society was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). During Reconstruction, the Klan terrorized Republicans, persecuted blacks, and intimidated scalawags. The 1920s witnessed a rebirth of the KKK in the United States. Again the Protestant churches responded in a variety of ways. While most denominations deplored the covert activities of the Klan, few spoke out directly and publicly condemned the Klan:

The attitude of the Protestant churches toward the Klan as reflected in the minutes of national conventions, assemblies and councils reveals resolutions deploring lynching and mob violence but none referred to the Ku Klux Klan.²

Evidence indicates that without the support of Protestants in general and Methodists in particular, the Klan could not have enrolled the numbers of people nor gained the political power it wielded during the 1920s in Texas.

By 1920 blacks made up about 15 percent of Texas' population of 4.5 million. After the Great Migration, the percentage of Texas blacks declined between 1910 and 1920. The neighboring state of Oklahoma had even fewer blacks, 7 percent. Declining numbers of blacks in Texas gave little impetus to Ku Klux Klan expansion in the southwest.³ From the pulpit, however, one did not hear a message discouraging Klan participation. Prominent ministers such as Methodist Bishop Wilbur Thirfield of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, declared that, "the problem of the South is the presence of 10 million colored [sic] people, the masses of whom have only barely been touched by the higher moral and religious

¹Wilbur P. Thirfield, *Address Before the Working Conference on the Organic Union of Methodism held at Northwestern University, 1916* (New Orleans: Louisiana Printing, 1916), 2.

²Robert Moats Miller, "A Note on the Relationship Between the Protestant Churches and the Revived Ku Klux Klan," *Journal of Southern History* 22 (August 1956): 363.

³Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 22-23.

life of the church."⁴ Congregations believed that law and order must be preserved in the face of perceived threats to traditional ways of life.

Real and imagined fears characterized the years after World War I. An emotional letdown occurred in the south after the war; native-born southerners believed that the new immigrants threatened their jobs, and the debate over President Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations implied an end to isolationism. Blacks returning from the war in Europe displayed "uppitiness" about social and economic conditions in the south. During the 1920s the Klan would prey on all these fears while it built a national organization of nine million members.⁵

A licensed Methodist preacher named William Joseph Simmons developed, organized and led the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1920s. In addition to preaching, the tall bespectacled southerner worked as a traveling salesman, promoter of fraternal organizations, and as a professor of southern history.⁶

In 1915 Simmons, capitalizing on the Atlanta premiere of the film, *Birth of a Nation*, chartered the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. The ex garter salesman developed a hierarchy of officials with impressive regalia by using the symbols and rituals of the Reconstruction Klan. In *America's Menace or The Enemy Within*, Simmons described the experience:

In the year 1915, I was sufficiently prepared in head and heart, to make a start on my life's mission. I was its sole parent, author and founder. I named it in sacred memory and honor of, and as a memorial to, its noblest, most valiant and knightly ancestor: namely, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.⁷

In place of the carpetbagger, Simmons substituted the Roman Catholic. While the Klan continued targeting blacks, it also victimized Jews and foreign-born citizens. The Klan, Simmons maintained, stood for "100% Americanism" and perpetual rule by native white Americans. Hostile toward bootleggers and modernists, the KKK focused its efforts on intimidating them also.⁸

Despite Simmons' promotional efforts, the Klan gained less than five thousand members until he hired a pair of professional publicists, Edward Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler, in 1920. Clarke and Tyler signed a promotional contract with Simmons which guaranteed Clarke and Tyler \$8 out of every \$10 raised by selling annual Klan memberships. During the early twenties Clarke and Tyler earned as much as \$40,000 a month

⁴Thirskield, *Address Before the Working Conference on the Organic Union of Methodism*, 15.

⁵Richard T. Shaefer, "The Ku Klux Klan: Continuity and Change," *Phylon* 32 (January 1971): 147.

⁶John M. Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1924), 17.

⁷William Joseph Simmons, *America's Menace or The Enemy Within* (Atlanta: Bureau of Patriotic Books, 1926), 66.

⁸"The Invisible Empire in the Spotlight," *Current Opinion* (November 1921): 562-563.

as Klan membership grew. The arrangement made the promoters wealthy in a short period of time.⁹

As an additional promotional strategy, the Invisible Empire used preachers of the gospel as heralds of its message. Each Klan meeting opened with a prayer from the Kludd, or Klan chaplain, and closed with a Klan benediction, "May the blessings of our God wait upon thee, may no strife disturb thy days, nor sorrow distress thy nights."¹⁰ According to the historian John Higham, the Klan increased its membership by promoting militant Protestantism.¹¹ Several Texas preachers, including Methodists J. T. Renfro of Dallas and Alonzo Monk of Arlington, left the pulpit and became itinerant Klan lecturers. Other ministers "blessed God that men of high standing and clean and cool judgment have banded together in an order that demands law enforcement and local reforms."¹²

When the National Catholic Bureau of Information compiled a list of Protestant ministers who preached pro-Klan sermons in 1923, they discovered sixty-nine sermons which openly identified the Klan; Methodists delivered twenty-one and Baptists, fourteen.¹³ Ten of the Methodist sermons were preached in Texas. By December, 1923, thirty-seven Klan periodicals existed and Protestants edited at least two of them.¹⁴

Protestant historians have noted the significant role played by Methodists in the success of the Texas Klan. According to Frederick Norwood, in all periods of Methodist history the prevailing social system affected the church, and in the 1920s the KKK enjoyed great success among Methodists.¹⁵ Walter Vernon, United Methodist historical scholar, identified a number of distinguished Methodist clergy who openly supported the Invisible Empire: H. D. Knickerbocker of Wichita Falls, C. D. Montgomery of Burkburnett, and R. T. Renfro of Dallas, to name but a few. "While the secrecy of the period protected the identity of many preachers, the Klan dominated all Methodist Annual Conferences between 1922 and 1925."¹⁶

⁹Everett R. Clinchy, *All in the Name of God* (New York: John Day & Co., 1934), 20, 95-96.

¹⁰House of Representatives Committee on Rules, *Hearings Before The Committee on Rules*, 67th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 1921), 115.

¹¹John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of Nativism 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 293.

¹²According to C. Vann Woodward in *Origins of the New South*, by 1915 there were 44,400 Methodist and Baptist churches in the south, and 82% were located in small towns. Together, Methodists and Baptists accounted for nearly 90% of all Protestants east of the Mississippi River; Harry G. Knowles, cited in Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*, 89.

¹³Michael Williams, *The Shadow of the Pope* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1932), 317-318; Charles Merz, "The Methodist Lobby," *New Republic* 43 (October 13, 1926): 215.

¹⁴Williams, *The Shadow of the Pope*, 317-318.

¹⁵Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 369.

¹⁶Methodist Annual Conferences set church policy for the next twelve months; Walter Vernon, et al. *The Methodist Excitement in Texas: A History* (Dallas: United Methodist Historical Society, 1984), 253, 264.

H. D. Knickerbocker also served as a member of the Board of Trustees of Southern Methodist University and as finance director of the North Texas Methodist Annual Conference. He taught the men's Bible class at First Methodist Church in Wichita Falls, and after each Bible lesson the men marched in Klan attire to the worship hall. The Texas Methodist Centennial Yearbook of 1934 identifies Knickerbocker as a General Conference delegate in the years 1922 and 1926. Undoubtedly, endorsement of the Klan by such a prominent Methodist helped the KKK recruit new members in Texas. Indicative of his sympathy for the hooded order, R. T. Renfro was instrumental in the construction of a Klan hospital in Kingsville.¹⁷

Preachers often gave law and order as their rationale for supporting the KKK. In a guest sermon preached at Trinity Methodist Church in El Paso, H. D. Knickerbocker proclaimed:

Justice may sometimes be rightfully administered outside the law. Jesus Christ did this when he took the cat o' nine tails and drove the money changers from the temple. In this respect He was the first Ku Klux Klansman.¹⁸

Percy Knickerbocker, H. D.'s brother, was the pastor of the El Paso church. While denying any affiliation with the Invisible Empire, Percy remarked to friends on several occasions that he saw no problem with a Klan interest in enthroning decency and righteousness. During Percy's service at Trinity Methodist Church (1916-1922) the membership increased from 1,026 to 1,826, and the local Klan chapter met in the church basement. From 1920 to 1922, Klan membership increased throughout Texas, reaching 200,000 by 1922.¹⁹

Some Methodist leaders expressed alarm as Klan power expanded in Texas. Bishop Edwin Mouzon noted, "I have been greatly distressed over the KKK growth in Texas, and nothing distresses me so much as the fact that many of our preachers have joined this organization."²⁰ Klan sympathy also infected other denominations. At the Southern Baptist Convention of 1923 a speaker reminded listeners that no true American could support mob violence, whether the mob be masked or unmasked.²¹ Most

¹⁷The Kingsville hospital was later sold to private interests, as was Hope Cottage in Dallas, financed and built by the Dallas Klan chapter; Norman Leroy Murphy, *The Relationship of the Methodist Church to the Ku Klux Klan in Texas 1920-1928*. (MA Thesis, University of Texas, 1971), 4; Olin W. Nail, ed., *The Methodist Centennial Yearbook* (Elgin, Tx.: Olin Nail Publisher, 1934), 234-235.

¹⁸Shawn Lay, *War, Revolution and the Ku Klux Klan: A Study of Intolerance in a Border City* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1985), 105.

¹⁹Lay, 77.

²⁰Edwin Mouzon to F. H. Hitchcock, 15 August 1922, Mouzon Papers, Item 6042, Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University.

²¹A. C. Miller, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (Nashville, Tn.: Broadman Press, 1930), 756.

preachers maintained a discreet silence and the lack of official church action against Klan sympathizers is one indication of board Klan support within each denomination.

As Klan membership increased in Texas, the hooded order encouraged Protestant participation. Imperial Wizard Simmons claimed in a *New York Times* interview that in 1922 the average increase in Klan membership was 3500 a day, representing \$45,000 in Klan revenue.²² In 1922 alone, 1,200,000 Americans became Klansmen, with 20 percent of the national growth occurring in Texas. Klan leaders decided that the Invisible Empire could best achieve its goals through political involvement. As part of this policy, Imperial Kleagle Clarke approached Protestant ministers and enlisted their support, while reminding the preachers that the Klan shared church concerns about bootlegging, crime and vice in America.²³

News of Klan political involvement provided verbal ammunition for Protestant preachers who shared Klan goals. After participating in a Klan march on Washington, D.C., in August 1925, Reverend H. E. Woolever wrote:

Of the 83,000 marchers, there was not an individual among the white-robed tens of thousands who was not a Protestant nor one who had not declared his faith in Christ . . . ministers were in considerable numbers to advance the cause of justice and righteousness.²⁴

Wherever orthodox Protestants dominated, the Klan thrived. Journalist Edward Devine summarized a Texas trip by claiming that everywhere he visited, prominent local residents were Klan members. When Devine attended a Protestant church the preacher read a Klan letter threatening anti-law and order elements in the community. Devine maintained that the congregation knew that in all likelihood the county judge, the district attorney and the county sheriff were Klansmen, and that "what the letter threatened the KKK could in all probability execute through the ordinary channels of justice."²⁵

During the 1920s the Methodist Episcopal Church, South resisted merger attempts by northern Methodists. "Hands off, Brethren! Don't touch the ark, or try to turn over the cart," implored a southern Methodist.²⁶

²²*New York Times*, September 23, 1937.

²³Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 170.

²⁴H. E. Woolever, cited in Clinchy, *All In the Name of God*, 105.

²⁵In an oral interview with the author, Frances Nelson of Dallas, Texas, stated that as a girl in Rio Hondo, Texas, she could recognize community leaders in Klan attire by their feet. Frances recalled that the school superintendent had the biggest feet in town and was easily recognized when he arrived for a church service; Edward Devine, "More About The Klan," *Survey* (April 8, 1922): 10-11; Norman Brown, *Hood, Bonnet and Little Brown Jug: Texas Politics 1921-1928* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1978), 58.

²⁶Norwood, *The Story of Methodism*, 368.

Southern Methodists also defeated northern attempts to increase democracy within the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. What many southerners feared most was change.

Southern preachers realized that the Klan's objectives compared favorably with their own. Both the KKK and the church wanted a moral society, and since the church usually kept politics at arms length, the Klan could help by acting more directly. One Klansman boasted, "We stood for the same things as the church, but the Klan did things the church would not do."²⁷ The Klan administered "law and order" with beatings and intimidation. After becoming politically active the techniques of the Invisible Empire included boycotts of Catholic businesses, political pressure, and smear campaigns against those feared by Klan leaders.²⁸

Though the Methodist annual conferences adopted resolutions condemning child labor and other social concerns, the church remained silent on the Klan issue. At the 1922 West Texas Conference meeting in Lampassas, Professor John Granberry of Southwestern University introduced a resolution condemning "bigotry, sectarianism, prejudice of race and nationality."²⁹ Not only did the resolution fail, but a Klan sponsored report passed, calling for Methodist cooperation with every organization supporting law and order. In appreciation, a group of Klansmen entered the Lampassas Methodist church in Klan attire, and presented the startled pastor with an offering of money.³⁰ When southern Methodism did break its silence concerning the Klan, it often supported the hooded order instead of condemning it.

On the other hand, William Ainsworth, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Dallas, allowed Klan opponents the use of his name when a small group organized against the Klan. A careful reading of the group's charter, the "Dallas Citizens League Against the Ku Klux Klan," reveals that Bishop Ainsworth contributed only a mild statement criticizing the hooded order: "Many of the principles of the KKK may be patriotic and worthy, but there can be no doubt that the Klan assumes to be a masked monitor of society."³¹

The only consistent Klan opposition came from the church press. Throughout the twenties Methodist journalists denounced the Klan and its tactics, but the attacks were infrequent. As church historian Robert Moats Miller noted, "While the Methodist press might have denounced the Invisible Order more frequently than it did, at least nine leading

²⁷Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 294.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Vernon, et al., *The Methodist Excitement in Texas*, 265.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Dallas Citizens League Anti-Klan Charter, Ku Klux Klan Special File, Bridwell Library, SMU, 11.

newspapers were not completely silent."³² Methodists and Baptists, according to Miller, gave the Klan its strongest church support.

Statements by church leaders toward the status of blacks in the south reflected a patronizing attitude. The North Texas Methodist Conference Committee on Temperance and Social Service issued the following statement: "We will lend ourselves as pastors and laymen in doing what we can in helping the negro [sic] by preaching to and advising him in such ways as deemed wise and prudent."³³

In spite of the efforts of southern ministers to keep blacks "in their place," lynchings occurred in significant numbers during the twenties. Between 1920-1925, over two hundred southern blacks died in public lynchings, viewed by hundreds, if not thousands, of witnesses. Seventy-five lynchings took place in Texas alone. During the same period only twenty-three whites died from lynching, and none after 1923.³⁴ The lynching figures do not account for gang murders or race riots. Although lynchings frequently happened in the south, few preachers spoke out strongly against these incidents. Methodist Bishop Frederick Leete told parishioners that "outlawing lynching will do little to stop it . . . rarely is much stress laid on the victim of the crime leading to the lynching . . . one way to stop lynching is to remove its causes."³⁵ The lack of official church condemnation of lynchings is another indication of Klan support among Methodists.

On the matter of race, Klan leaders stated the Invisible Order's position clearly and succinctly. At the First Annual Meeting of the Grand Dragon Knights, which took place in North Carolina in July, 1923, an Exalted Cyclops proclaimed, "The Klan has no fight on the negro [sic], he is recognized as an inferior race."³⁶

By 1925 internal controversy over money mismanagement and sexual intrigue damaged the KKK's reputation. Clarke and Tyler, the Klan publicity team, offended the conservative membership by engaging in an illicit affair with each other. Congressional hearings uncovered incompetence and fraud in Klan finances. The public grew tired of frequent charges and countercharges made by various Klan factions. The *Christian Century*

³²Miller, "A Note on the Relationship Between the Protestant Churches and the Revived Ku Klux Klan," 360.

³³Vernon, *The Methodist Excitement in Texas*, 264.

³⁴Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), 481; Jessie P. Guzman et al., eds. *The Negro Yearbook* (New York, 1952), 278; *Crime of Lynching*, United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary Hearings (Washington, D.C., GPO, 1948), 30.

³⁵Frederick Deland Leete, *Adventures of A Traveling Preacher* (Boston: W. A. Wilde Publishing, 1952), 182.

³⁶*Papers Read at the Meeting of Grand Dragons, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, at their First Annual meeting held at Asheville, North Carolina, July 1923* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 125.

reported that as of February 23, 1928, the Ku Klux Klan ceased to exist and "at midnight each knight removed his bedsheet for the last time."³⁷

Many Methodists resisted racial integration long after the decline of the Klan. When the three branches of Methodism combined in 1939, forming The Methodist Church, a separate conference was established for black congregations. At the time of unification, 300,000 blacks embraced Methodism in the United States and many observers predicted that segregated conferences would never solve the problem of race relations within the church.³⁸ Others, however, sought a temporary solution by the creation of a separate Negro [sic] Methodist Church. Bishop John Moore of Texas stated:

Separation of the races in the South had become a well established custom. The Southern people were fully convinced that this state of things was best for both races, and best for Southern civilization, and that it should continue. Any movement or trend that might change this condition was disturbing and was regarded with suspicion and opposition.³⁹

As late as 1947 only 37 percent of Methodist District Superintendents in the south supported the following statement calling for an end to racial separation in church activities: "A Christian goal is a nonsegregated Church and a nonsegregated society."⁴⁰ Racial issues in 1947 divided the church as they divided American society.

The eminent historian George Tindall commented in *The Emergence of the New South* that "careful historians have found that none of the major church bodies and periodicals worked closely with the Klan."⁴¹ While Methodist officials in Texas did not endorse the Klan publicly, the Invisible Empire benefitted from significant support from within the church. The church condoned Klan goals by remaining silent, although some church leaders occasionally disagreed with KKK tactics.

Militant Protestantism and the Ku Klux Klan shared common beliefs; both were anti-black, anti-alien, anti-Catholic, anti-evolution, and anti-modern. In many ways the Klan addressed the fears of many southern Methodists; it brought the church into clear focus with the past, and above all, the Ku Klux Klan reminded southerners of their belief in a south filled with "moonlight and magnolias." Unfortunately, the Klan also reflected other southern traditions, those of violence and mass coercion of the scapegoat and the heretic.⁴²

³⁷"The Klan is Dead," *Christian Century* (March 8, 1928), 306-307.

³⁸Dwight W. Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 318.

³⁹Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, 408.

⁴⁰Methodist District Superintendents supervise clergy under the Bishop's direction; Culver, *Negro Segregation in the Methodist Church*, 318.

⁴¹George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 196.

⁴²W. J. Cash, *The Mind of The South* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Books, 1956), 337.

After many years of psychoanalyzing Americans, the distinguished psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung noted:

I have frequently observed in the analysis of Americans that the inferior side of the personality, the "shadow archetype" is represented (in dreams) by a black or an Indian . . . whereas in the dreams of a European it would be represented by a somewhat shady individual of his own kind.⁴³

The southern Methodist and the southern Klansman feared the changes that would inevitably come for blacks in the south. Rather than embrace blacks as partners in faith, the southern Methodist church became the silent partner of the Ku Klux Klan in an attempt to forestall the day of reckoning.

⁴³Carl Gustav Jung, cited in Michael Adler Fordham, ed., *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, 20 vols. (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1956), 5:183.