Saving America: Religion and the Watergate Affair

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This paper examines the intersection of religion and information delivery in the early 1970s, specifically regarding how Christian denominations reacted to the Watergate Scandal during Richard M. Nixon’s presidency. As church bodies determined to voice their opinions about the controversy swirling in the American political system, they first grappled with how best to communicate to a large audience, which included first, their lay constituencies, next their leadership networks and clergy, and finally the larger American public. Understanding how they engaged in this communication at that time can assist scholars today who study the past and want to examine it as accurately and thoroughly as possible.

The historical background of the controversy provides much needed context. A June 1972 burglary at the Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate Building in Washington, D.C. set in motion a flurry of events that shook the foundations of the U.S. government. Hired Republican operatives were caught, leading administration officials, including the president, to attempt to cover up White House involvement, with the hope of protecting Richard M. Nixon’s hold on the presidency. Congress, the Judicial Branch, and the media undertook a two year investigation to uncover the truth. By its end, Americans had grown more cynical about their government; the Republican Party found itself in chaos; and a president had resigned in disgrace. Numerous histories have examined the Watergate scandal itself, Richard M. Nixon and his administration’s role in it, and the multiple layers of investigation that uncovered it. Ample studies tell about the specific events, the determination by a number of people to discover the truth, and what
eventually forced Nixon’s resignation. Yet too little scholarship has studied how American society as a whole reacted, other than the ambiguous notion of a general malaise and distrust of the government on the heels of the Vietnam War and this political turmoil. Of particular interest, there has been no academic study that scrutinizes the religious community’s reaction to Watergate. Yet time and again writers, politicians, and pundits then and now referred to Watergate as a national moral and ethical crisis. Certainly Christian institutions in the United States had some comment on a national emergency that undermined the government and, according to some, jeopardized the viability of the Constitution.

This paper glimpses into the larger work I am undertaking, from which came the specific analysis for this presentation. Indeed, my current research attempts to fill this gap in understanding social and religious reactions to Watergate, specifically examining the response of American Christians from 1972 to the end of 1974. This paper will focus on five Protestant denominations, who surprisingly held similar communication techniques, though given the era and a more limited means of communication this makes sense. The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS), the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), and the United Church of Christ (UCC) all participated in the national dialogue about Watergate. This sampling offers a broad range of voices, both politically and theologically. The UCC presents a liberal theological and political point of view, the two Lutheran bodies a moderate point of view politically, but the LCA a more liberal theology and the LCMS a conservative theology, the SBC a conservative bent in both arenas, and the AME a conservative theology but relatively liberal politics.
Regardless of their general theological and political stance, the 1970s allowed for a more limited means of communication with constituents than today’s world. For most denominations, including those within this study, that meant publicity through the church’s main periodical. Each denomination had an official magazine that reported on church affairs. For these church bodies, the list includes the *Christian Recorder* (AME), the *Lutheran* (LCA), the *Lutheran Witness* (LCMS), several Baptist regional papers and the Baptist Press Release service (SBC), and *A.D.* (UCC). These channels gave leaders several options for communicating. Specifically, they utilized editorials and feature articles. The other way that these denominations communicated was through their leadership, and specifically elected presidents/bishops. Finally, the church bodies as a whole delivered important messages at annual or semi-annual conventions, where resolutions received majority endorsement and became the official policy of the denomination. The delegates and messengers to these conventions were chosen by election, though the denominations had various ways of doing this voting. Knowing this process allows us still today a glimpse into how these Christian institutions communicated.

A prime source of communicating general opinions came through the numerous editorials that each of these church bodies published in their official periodicals. While not statements sanctioned by the church or officially endorsed, these respected clergy and church leaders possessed one of the most visible tools for making statements about church, societal, and government events. For example, both liberal and conservative editors spoke about Presidents Nixon and Ford. Those who addressed Nixon did so to criticize what they perceived as his immoral behavior. J. Martin Bailey of *A.D.* asserted
in January 1973 that the nation needed a leader who could lead “us out of the doldrums.” He stated that Nixon kept to himself and never tried to unite the nation during his first term, thus necessitating a new leader because of the Watergate crisis. The conservative *Western Recorder* of the Southern Baptist Convention voiced a similar sentiment after the release of the secret White House Tapes transcripts. Editor C. J. Daley, Jr. was shocked by the president’s language and even more concerned by the “spirit of the conversations” he heard. He thought that the president and his administration had degraded the presidency, thus necessitating a moral outcry from the nation to change national politics. In contrast, the *Lutheran Witness* praised Gerald R. Ford when he took office and saw it as a sign that the nation was heading in the right direction. The anonymous editorial applauded Ford’s honest and deep faith, saw it as a sign of hope for America’s future, and stated that it was genuine, unlike the faith convictions of the Nixon administration.¹

Other editors used the occasion to more generally condemn the Watergate behavior throughout the government and call for Christians to work to help alter the situation. *Lutheran* editor Edgar R. Trexler explained that the churches must participate in fixing the nation because “the virtues taught by the church are now being upheld and reinforced by millions who would not consider themselves ‘church people’” because the “truth and integrity” taught by the church had gone lacking. He concluded that “the national uproar is a compliment for what the church teaches, and indicates that its message is highly desired.” Editor B. J. Nolen of the *Christian Recorder* concurred. He proclaimed that the national “climate smells to high heaven. Both Church and State must be put back on track and let the peoples’ train get moving again.” To Trexler and Nolen,

Watergate signaled a time for the churches to renew a moral spirit in the nation, which they attempted to do through their respective platforms.²

Major articles within the newsmagazines also took the opportunity to craft a message for the church bodies. Similar to the editorials, they represented but one author’s point of view, but an opinion that carried the weight of titles, expertise, and space in the official publications. All of them, again regardless of politics or theology, therefore took time to not only bewail the national political climate but also offer solutions. Larold K. Schulz of the UCC’s Engage/Social Action stated that Christian hope, though tested, would vanquish the “selfish and evil motives” of those who created the problem because “God comes into history and overcomes evil with justice, mercy, and love.” Paul C. Empie of the Lutheran World Federation wrote for the Lutheran that Watergate’s representation of a “moral-malaise” in all the nation meant that the “proper role of Christians individually and collectively in sensitizing the consciences of fellow citizens toward these issues” was to insert Christian principles into the conversation. Lutheran Witness writer Rudolph F. Norden voiced a similar sentiment. He thanked God for granting the nation a new president with integrity after Nixon resigned and declared that through the prayers of the people the Holy Spirit would guide him in healing the nation. For the Baptist Press Release, Phil Strickland wrote that he tired of Baptists stating that they “could not do anything about the problem.” He maintained that “we must always remember . . . that Christ walks before us” even into American politics and that a Christian voice could help solve the problem, even in the most difficult places. Finally, an article about a speech that Mary Elizabeth Anderson gave appeared in the

Christian Recorder. The AME speaker acknowledged that “moral status has fallen to the lowest ebb” but that looking to God would reveal the answers for the national calamity.3

The other form of communication that these denominations used was statements and addresses from their leaders, either a bishop or president depending on the lexicon of that entity. These men could write letters, speak to the press, publish editorials and articles, deliver sermons, give speeches, and personally meet with people and congregations. In the case of the church bodies here, all of these men were elected to their positions.

And they all felt a responsibility to comment on public matters, including those that affected the government. Even before Watergate, they wanted church members to take their faith into the voting booth, as President J.A.O. Preus pled when he asked the LCMS to “call upon Almighty God to bless our nation, our elected officials, and all who are in authority.” He hoped that such entreaties to heaven would produce “pious and faithful rulers” because the church inserted itself into politics through prayer. Preus sent this correspondence to all LCMS pastors and wanted them to communicate the message to their congregations. Once Watergate became more public and toward the end of Nixon’s administration, LCA President Robert J. Marshall similarly asserted that the church must always understand current times in order to best react to whatever circumstances surround it. Addressing the LCA national convention, he declared that, by struggling to maintain a Christian message in the public life, “the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ can so reign in our lives through faith as to make us strong for the struggle.

It is time for a vision of ultimate victory that makes temporal defeats endurable and temporal victories relative but significant. **It is time for vision to be met with action.**

No doubt he in part had Watergate in mind when he made these comments.\(^4\)

Other denominational leaders more directly addressed their people regarding Nixon. AME Bishops gathered in Washington, D.C. to voice displeasure with the administration’s record on race relations and assisting the impoverished. In the midst of Watergate, some found reason to complain about more than just the dirty politics because these bishops felt that White House policies would “plunge us in the direction of a period of social retrogression and despair.” UCC President Robert V. Moss also condemned the administration when he spoke to UCC delegate to the UCC General Synod, complaining that Watergate stemmed from too large a concentration of power in the presidency. He compared the American situation to Biblical stories of the king of ancient Israel thinking himself above the law, which brought about the wrath of the prophets and later God. In order to “drain the poisons that remain from Vietnam and Watergate,” the nation must rectify this imbalance, with the church’s help. SBC President Owen Cooper also spoke to his national messengers about the Watergate crisis. He asserted that all of these the government problems led to an urgent need to share the Word of God. Echoing Moss, the conservative evangelical warned that high office did not insulate anyone from evil, as Watergate demonstrated. He hoped that, “if from Watergate we learn that there are moral standards, that there are Christian ethics, that there is right and wrong, and that we need to return to the simple virtues of our founding fathers – then Watergate may have been

worth the price.” Using their bully pulpits, denominational leaders communicated an important Christian message in the midst of Watergate.5

Perhaps the most powerful and assertive Christian form of communication came from the annual and biennial national conventions of each of these church bodies. Here, delegates, messengers, clergy, and laity could come together, use the force of their numbers, and attempt to influence the national situation. When examining these resolutions, however, a more distinct split occurred between the liberal and conservative churches. The liberal denominations forcefully condemned the American government in looking to move forward after Watergate, while their conservative counterparts stopped criticizing the government and issued more nationalistic resolutions.

With often harsh condemnations, liberal to moderate denominations denounced the Nixon administration and current national climate. They wanted Christians to more forcefully insert themselves onto the national scene to solve the problem. The Session of the New Jersey Annual Conference of the AME Church outlined the abuses of power in the government and the problems the nation currently faced, in large part because “the President has, by a series of diversionary maneuvers attempted to thwart the constitutional processes.” They then “demanded” that Richard Nixon “fully cooperate with the lawful investigation” and explain all these matters to the American people. An LCA Committee charged with responding to the LCA president’s report to the national assembly also wanted the denomination to address abuses of power because “undeniable theological and ethical considerations” must come from the church to solve the national problem. They avowed that the United States cried out for the church’s moral leadership

because of the crisis. Even more forcefully, delegates to the UCC General Synod in 1973 decried the “general raveling away of the nation’s moral fabric” as evidenced when they watched John Dean’s testimony in the midst of the gathering. They said that the church had failed the nation morally and pledged to rectify that with Christian education and activism. The solution for these church bodies to the Watergate affair rested with the power of Christians to assert moral authority over the nation.⁶

In contrast, conservative Protestant denominations resolved less at their national meetings about Watergate and fixing it, but issued more patriotic declarations that guaranteed the nation would survive because of its Christian commitment. Preparing for the nation’s bicentennial, LCMS delegates thanked God for the country’s religious freedom and wanted the church to participate in the national celebration. President Preus even declared that the Board of Directors would oversee the LCMS’s celebrations and get information to the churches. In this way, the LCMS brought their Christian witness to the nation. The Southern Baptist Convention messengers similarly stated that “government is ordained by God” and that, despite the recent abuses of power, they would not become “a part of any growing pessimism” and instead would “commend and support government leaders” who led in a moral fashion. By continuing to glorify God and bring that influence into the political realm, the SBC would ensure that “the nation may be strengthened as a guarantor of liberty and justice for all.” With such nationalistic

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declarations, these denominations committed the country to Christianity and vowed that their version of it would help lead the nation forward.\textsuperscript{7}

As a link to libraries today, thankfully these materials remain available to historians and anyone else curious about studying this era. Some of the periodicals even appear in internet databases, while most exist in a hardcopy format somewhere. Indeed, the more detailed and extensive the research, the more vital it becomes that the original hardcopy versions be preserved and made available. Many databases, for example, fail to include letters to the editors or some editorials, both of which serve as crucial sources. These resources also fail to get notice in indexes, both from that time period and from contemporary cataloging. Advertisements and the lay out also contribute to understanding the past, none of which typically appears in something recently scanned onto the internet. Even if stored offsite, and thus requiring advanced notice to obtain them, they remain invaluable resources for scholars. Undergraduate students can gain an appreciation for historical research by examining these relatively available primary documents. In other words, the denominations from the 1970s continue to deliver the same message, over and over to new generations.

Studying denominational reactions to Watergate harkens back to what feels in many ways like the ancient past. Communication delivery was radically different than in our modern era. Most churches relied heavily on their official periodicals and statements by leaders to explain their point of view to the nation. The preservation of these materials allows their voice to move into the present era and beyond, a crucial link to the past for everyone to consider.

\textsuperscript{7} Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Convention Minutes, 4-11 July 1975, Anaheim, CA, Concordia Historical Institute; Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution on Integrity and Morality in the American Political System,” SBC Resolutions, June 1973, www.SBC.net.