

A RESPECTABLE MILITANCY:

Reverend J. Raymond Henderson
and the Civil Rights Struggle
in Los Angeles, 1941–1963

By *David J. Neumann*

ABSTRACT: Reverend J. Raymond Henderson personified the tensions within the Los Angeles black community's struggle for equality during his 1941–1963 tenure as pastor of the Second Baptist Church. While Rev. Henderson advocated the patient cultivation of respectability as a means of winning white acceptance, he also adopted a militant stance toward civil rights as a leader of the local NAACP, associate of more outspoken leaders, and the voice of an internationalist outlook, but a form of militancy that seemed increasingly inadequate by the early '60s.

Keywords: Civil Rights Movement in Los Angeles; Black churches and civil rights; Cold War and civil rights

In 1951, Reverend J. Raymond Henderson, pastor of a prominent black congregation in Los Angeles, the Second Baptist Church, drafted an outline entitled “A Suggested Strategy for the Achievement of First Class American Citizenship.” Presented at the annual meeting of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), this document reveals the mature thinking of a pastor involved in the civil rights struggle for two decades. Henderson began by asserting that African Americans

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did not yet enjoy “first class American citizenship” and that such rights must be actively wrested from “oppressive majorities.” He advocated a “many-sided” strategy that included a mixture of spiritual and secular tools: the gospel, Jesus, prayer, conferences, petitions, mass meetings, and politics. He stressed the need for “militancy”—non-violent, he clarified parenthetically—and the use of print, the pulpit, radio waves, and the courts. He proclaimed that the NAACP, “the Negro’s general assembly,” “deserves our most loyal support.” He also argued that black respectability was a crucial weapon. African Americans should make “more conscious efforts at culture and refinement.” He also counseled “repudiation of communism,” the promotion of “classes in good citizenship,” and accentuation of “the progress of the race,” all of which would communicate to white Americans that black Americans merited the rights for which they were fighting. He closed with an acknowledgment of the “distance yet to be travelled before the day of our complete freedom.”¹

This document captures the central tension that animated Henderson’s career as a Christian minister in Los Angeles from 1941 to 1963. On one hand, Henderson was convinced that patient cultivation of black respectability—embracing white middle-class standards of behavior and dress—would play a crucial role in whites’ eventual acceptance of black equality.² He consistently signaled his own respectability through dignified behavior and dress, articulate sermons, and robust civic engagement. On the other hand, as an advocate of what Robert Wuthnow has called “public religion,” Henderson was convinced that churches should actively

1. J. Raymond Henderson to E. I. Robinson, May 28, 1951, Second Baptist Church Papers, Special Collections, Doheny Library, University of Southern California.
2. Evelyn Higginbotham’s concept of black religious respectability and its relationship to activism provides a key frame for the study. This paper extends analysis beyond her 1920 endpoint, while moving away from her focus on lay people—and women. Although this paper does not explicitly examine gender, it seems clear that Henderson had much more latitude to operate than most women of the time: his profession was closed to women in most denominations, his public civic role was an option available to very few women, and his aggressive advocacy of civil rights evoked martial rhetoric that resonated with male stereotypes. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Other scholars have followed Higginbotham in using the framework of respectability to analyze the black church. Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000) addresses the efforts of blue-collar women to define respectability in an empowering way. Clay White Jr., *Rise to Respectability: Race, Religion, and the Church of God in Christ* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2012) applies respectability to a Pentecostal black denomination.

engage with the political, economic, and voluntary sectors of American society.³ His aggressive zeal for civil rights pushed the boundaries whites—and some middle-class blacks—accepted, earning him the title “militant pastor” from *The California Eagle*, the city’s pre-eminent black paper at the time.⁴ Just as Henderson believed that pastors should act as the primary role models of respectability, he also thought that they should play decisive leadership roles in the African-American public sphere, the middle-class network of newspapers, churches, community organizations, and personal relationships that provided a largely united front in upholding blacks’ dignity in the face of racism and collaborated in advancing the cause of racial equality.⁵

His 1941 move to Los Angeles to accept the pastorate at Second Baptist coincided with promising opportunities for the city’s black community brought on by World War II. The unprecedented scale of this global bloodshed ironically stirred utopian hopes among the city’s African Americans of an emerging era of justice—locally, nationally, and internationally.⁶ Henderson illustrates the unique leadership role that black pastors typically played in communicating the sacred dimension of a civil rights struggle that was fought in a secular public sphere. As spokesmen, as role models to their congregations and to the larger public, and as administrators who determined which activities would take place in their churches, their influence often surpassed that of leaders of secular organizations. Civil rights scholars frequently acknowledge that Southern black churches constituted “the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement.” Outside the South, however, assessments have been more tepid.⁷ Scholars of the City of Angels have largely ignored black churches, including their involvement in civil

3. Robert Wuthnow, *Producing the Sacred: An Essay on Public Religion* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

4. Editorial, *California Eagle*, October 16, 1941, 8A.

5. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 1–26. On the black public sphere, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 10–11.

6. Duke Ellington’s 1941 Los Angeles musical, *Jump for Joy*, also conveyed the dual recognition of unjust inequality and hopeful signs of a new era of opportunity and justice for African Americans. See Benjamin Cawthra, “Duke Ellington’s *Jump for Joy* and the Fight for Equality in Wartime Los Angeles,” *Southern California Quarterly* 98, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 5–58.

7. Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 4.

rights.⁸ Such neglect risks distorting the picture of Los Angeles's black activism. An account of Henderson's leadership illustrates and reveals the centrality of church-based activism in the history of the city's African American community. Black churches, as part of a larger black public sphere, played a central role in protest. More than any other civic organization, churches provided unique resources: transcendent language, temporal leadership, organizational and fundraising capacity, and large spaces for public gatherings.

As a case study of one important black pastor, this paper contributes to several important fields. First, Henderson provides insight into regional dynamics of civil rights activism. While the most significant struggles on a national scale did not take place in Southern California—no federal legislation or court rulings resulted from actions here⁹—his example offers a reminder that even after victories like creation of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice (FEPC), enforcement of its provisions depended on specific complaints of discrimination, which required struggles in dozens of locales throughout the nation, including Los Angeles.¹⁰ Even when the most notable protests, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, took place in Southern locations, they depended heavily on a far-flung nationwide network for various types of support, and relatively affluent black Angelenos played a significant role in that network.

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8. William Deverell and Greg Hise, eds., *A Companion to Los Angeles* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), a compendium of the state of the field on Los Angeles, includes no article on religion, much less on the black church. Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor, eds., *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001) does not devote any sustained attention to black churches. R. Drew Smith, Carroll A. Watkins Ali, R. Khari Brown, and Katie Day, *From Every Mountainside: Black Churches and the Broad Terrain of Civil Rights* (Albany: State University of New York, 2013) examines black churches in the civil rights movement outside the South. It includes a chapter on the church in the Bay Area, but nothing on Southern California. R. J. Smith, *The Great Black Way: L.A. in the 1940s and the Lost African-American Renaissance* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006) is a partial exception. This book focuses largely on black entertainment, but Smith does include a chapter largely devoted to the World War II activism of Clayton D. Russell, pastor of People's Independent Church. Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) devotes part of a paragraph specifically to Henderson, but he does not elaborate, nor does he document his statements about Henderson (150).
 9. Los Angeles attorney Loren Miller's crusade for an end to housing segregation in the California State Supreme Court cases *Fairchild v. Raines* (1944) and the *Sugar Hill* cases of 1945, and his role in the landmark federal Supreme Court case *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948) should, however, be noted.
 10. *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947) does not really constitute an exception, as the case was decided by a federal district court and later upheld by an appellate court on narrow grounds that did not challenge the Supreme Court's interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).

Second, an analysis of Henderson's seeming ambivalence toward communism—though he criticized communist ideology, he maintained strong friendships with several famous communists and sometimes praised the Soviet Union—shows how church-based engagement was drawn into the familiar tension between black civil rights activism and leftist politics. While much of the scholarship on this subject focuses on African American artists and intellectuals, the Cold War presented pastors with unique challenges in maintaining the policy and practice of respectability while continuing the effort to pursue racial justice.¹¹

Finally, Henderson's attention to the trans-Atlantic dimension of the civil rights struggle demonstrates an institutional religious link between African Americans in the United States and African nationalists that is typically overlooked by scholars who focus on postwar Black Atlantic civil rights activism or on the U.S. government's image-management efforts in the Cold War-civil rights nexus.¹² Henderson's involvement in missionary work in Africa deepens understanding of the ways black churches supported African development, not just evangelization. In this form of Pan-Africanism, church leaders advocated a potentially liberating message of basic dignity and eventual autonomy for black brothers and sisters oppressed by racialized imperial systems. But the force of this message was blunted by an ideology of respectability that embraced a white vision of Africans as presently degraded and in need of Western civilization for their development.¹³

This paper begins by exploring the evolution of Henderson's respectability, his militancy, and their synthesis before turning to

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11. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
 12. Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Penny von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
 13. Sylvia M. Jacobs, ed., *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in Africa* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1982); Sandy D. Martin, *Black Baptists and African Missions: The Origins of a Movement, 1880–1915* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990); and Walter L. Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

Second Baptist and Los Angeles's larger black community, where he spent most of his career. Then it looks at the local scene, examining Henderson's activist work with other Los Angeles leaders during World War II, particularly his controversial alliance with the left-leaning Congress of Industrial Organizations confederation of labor unions and his qualified sympathy for communist views. Next, the paper considers his involvement in the international civil rights struggle. In advocating rapid independence for colonial Africa, he criticized U.S. foreign policy and America's Cold War allies, though not as robustly as leftist intellectuals unconstrained by the burdens of middle-class Christian respectability. Finally, the paper explores Henderson's support for the direct-action campaigns of Martin Luther King Jr. He especially marshaled financial support, using his stature as a pastor to raise funds for the movement while steering away from direct personal involvement in marches and protests.

Henderson's twenty-two-year tenure at Second Baptist reveals both the possibilities and the limitations of respectable militancy, especially for black clergy. From the beginning of World War II until his retirement in 1963, Henderson sought to maintain his dignity while aggressively pursuing rights by sponsoring rallies, lobbying government officials, and supporting extensive fundraising campaigns for civil rights organizations. He illustrates the paradoxical influence and constraints black clergy faced by the nature of their position. The prominence of churches in the civil rights movement and the honor accorded pastors in the African American community rendered clergy indispensable to successful activism, whether at home or overseas. But their position as role models and moral leaders also placed tremendous pressure on them to maintain high standards of reputation, which limited their ability to participate in provocative activities and, consequently, constricted their influence. Attempting to stake out a precarious middle ground, Henderson found himself criticized by opponents at both ends of the political spectrum. His sympathies toward some communist causes undermined his reputation in the eyes of conservative whites, demonstrating the tenuousness of a respectability that rested in large part on white standards of acceptability. However, black anger over the slow pace of racial progress, which erupted in Watts shortly after his retirement, suggests the insufficient vigor of Henderson's brand of militancy. Indeed, the language of "militancy" now generally associated with the black nationalism of

the later 1960s bears little resemblance to Henderson's measured approach to civil rights.

HENDERSON AND BLACK CHURCHES IN LOS ANGELES'S PUBLIC SPHERE

Born in a log cabin in 1898, J. Raymond Henderson grew up in extreme poverty in rural Virginia. As a child he was often barefoot, hungry, and cold. After elementary school in Charlottesville, he enrolled at Virginia Union Academy, a Richmond preparatory school. To pay the school fees, he held a variety of jobs at different points. He was a water boy for stump pullers, a coal miner, and a café waiter. He vowed to overcome this hardship by embracing respectability through a career in Christian ministry.¹⁴ Henderson looked up to his childhood pastor, the key male role model in his fatherless life: "He became my hero and I wanted to be an educated man such as he was."¹⁵ Pastors often held tremendous sway in the lives of their congregants. A scholar of black churches, a minister at the same time as Henderson, explained that church members frequently referred to their relationship with "my pastor" with a unique sense of trust, loyalty, and attachment. They quoted their minister, cited his sermons authoritatively, and regularly recounted what he had done for them.¹⁶ Ministers belonged to a select group, and college- and seminary-trained ministers constituted an even smaller professional elite.¹⁷ After Virginia Union, Henderson received a Bachelor of Divinity from Oberlin College and completed a Master of Sacred Theology from Andover-Newton Theological Seminary.¹⁸

Henderson came of age during the Progressive era, a period when respectability was highly valued as activists often framed reform in

14. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 123.

15. J. Raymond Henderson, "Mighty Rugged Road:" *Nothin for Mah Journey* (self-published, 1966), 9.

16. See Charles V. Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: William Morrow & Co, Inc., 1972), 19.

17. A study completed not long after Henderson finished seminary indicated that 80 percent of black urban pastors had no college training, and nearly 87 percent lacked a bachelor of divinity (cited in Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 128–29). As late as 1972, a scholar of the African American church indicated the beginning of "an inclination toward demanding a better-trained minister—both in terms of general formal education and a seminary background" (Hamilton, 97).

18. Henderson, "Mighty Rugged Road," 17–18; "The American Negro in College, 1935–36," *The Crisis*, August 26, 1936, 236.

moral terms. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham defines respectability as equating “public behavior with individual self-respect and with the advancement of African Americans as a group.” Advocates were convinced that “certain ‘respectable’ behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America, and hence they strove to win the black lower class’s psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual mores.”¹⁹ Higginbotham argues that blacks viewed their actions not as accommodation but as a reasonable form of empowerment in a racist society. Although she concludes that advocating for civil rights often constituted the “logical conclusion” of respectability rather than a contradiction of it,²⁰ many blacks must have felt tension between a strategy that emphasized self-improvement according to white values and one that risked antagonizing whites by confronting racist customs.

In 1921, Henderson was ordained as a minister in the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., a “venerable and staid” institution, according to Karen Anderson.²¹ The largest black denomination in the United States, the NBC boasted a membership of nearly five million at the time. He also joined the NAACP, the nation’s oldest and most prestigious civil rights organization, signaling through his membership commitment both to civil rights and respectability. Although ostensibly secular, the NAACP had strong ties to black churches; most local chapters were run by ministers, and fundraising took place largely through local congregations.²²

Between 1925 and 1941, Henderson pastored at five different churches, where he sharpened his preaching, developed his financial and leadership skills, learned to deal with the politics of trustee boards, and developed a militant stance on civil rights issues.²³ He led Wheat Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, one of the city’s most prominent black churches, for six years. His actions there suggest an early embrace of civil rights activism. The year after he arrived at

19. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 14.

20. *Ibid.*, 221.

21. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 5; Karen Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 197.

22. Morris, *Origins*, 15.

23. Henderson, “Mighty Rugged Road,” 18–19.

Wheat Street, he joined with leftist organizations to defend Angelo Herndon, a young black Communist charged with incitement to insurrection for his role in leading a peaceful march.²⁴ Henderson might have sidestepped this issue and attended to narrower pastoral duties, as he paid a heavy toll for his involvement. New York City Council member Benjamin Davis Jr. later remembered Henderson's time "under fire" at Wheat Street and described him as "magnificently courageous right in the very teeth of the organized, police power of the lynchers in that state."²⁵ Henderson also offered to serve as the clearinghouse for any claims of racial prejudice in hiring for New Deal Works Progress Administration programs.²⁶

His final position before moving to Los Angeles was in New Rochelle, New York, where he pastored from 1937 to 1940. Although modestly successful in expanding church attendance, he seemed to view retiring the church's debt as his greatest contribution. It was his "firm conviction," he reflected on one occasion, that churches "should do business in as business-like a manner as possible," a view that indicates a core element of respectability.²⁷ He admitted that his impoverished childhood had shaped his concern for fiscal solvency, but considered it a matter of pride that he had been able to "leave each church a little more financially secure than when [he] arrived."²⁸

By 1941, Henderson was a well-educated forty-three-year-old pastor with leadership experience in a half-dozen states scattered across the eastern half of the United States. He also had a finely-honed skill in preaching, having won two separate sermon competitions. One sermon was ranked in the top six of ninety entries for *Great Century Pulpit* magazine and the other was one of the top twenty-five in a competition with 650 others.²⁹

When Second Baptist Church of Los Angeles, a large and prosperous church, called Henderson to lead its flock in 1941, it welcomed a prominent progressive pastor into a vibrant black community of

24. Charles H. Martin, "Communists and Blacks: The ILD and the Angelo Herndon Case," *The Journal of Negro History* 64, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 131-41.

25. *California Eagle*, February 8, 1945, 1.

26. Michael S. Holmes, "The Blue Eagle as 'Jim Crow Bird': The NRA and Georgia's Black Workers," *The Journal of Negro History* 57, no. 3 (July 1972): 276-83.

27. Henderson, "Mighty Rugged Road," 29.

28. *Ibid.*, 20.

29. "Reverend J. Raymond Henderson at Second Baptist Sunday," *California Eagle*, January 16, 1941, 5.

6,400. By the 1920s, “The Great Migration” had begun to swell the long-standing black population in western cities like Los Angeles. African American visitors described Southern California as a new Eden, a haven from the violence and discrimination of the South.³⁰ But these mythic evocations overstated the case, as opportunity and prejudice expanded side by side. The black homeownership rate was among the nation’s highest, blacks could attend public schools, and they routinely voted in local elections. But they also encountered housing restrictions, limited access to high-paying jobs, and growing demands from recent white Southern migrants to abide by segregation patterns familiar to them from home.³¹ Although the modest opportunities that were afforded to the city’s African Americans made construction of a black sphere possible, ironically, the persistence of racism made such a separate sphere necessary.

Largely migrants from the urban South, Los Angeles’s black community included a small professional class of lawyers, realtors, and small-business owners, though many community leaders were employed in blue-collar occupations.³² Whatever their class, black leaders aspired to respectability. As historian Doug Flamming says: “They believed in the sanctity of home, family, and church; placed a premium on self-discipline and education; and had a penchant for thrift, savings, and acquiring real estate. They were strivers and joiners. Economic racism blunted their financial ambitions, but they had faith in the promise of upward mobility for themselves and their children.”³³

Second Baptist Church was a key Los Angeles institution with a distinguished history. One of the city’s earliest black churches, it resided at the geographic and symbolic center of the black community. Second Baptist was a “fixture not only in Los Angeles but also throughout California and the West,” according to Flamming, with a reputation that enabled it to “recruit nationally prominent black ministers” like Henderson, “who had impressive connections around

30. Lonnie G. Bunch III, “‘The Greatest State for the Negro’: Jefferson L. Edmonds, Black Propagandist of the California Dream,” in de Graaf, Mulroy, and Taylor, *Seeking El Dorado*, 129–48.

31. Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 4–5.

32. Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1998), 254.

33. The quote is from Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 8.



Second Baptist Church, located at 2412 Griffith Avenue, Los Angeles, was designed by Paul R. Williams and constructed in 1924–26. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. *National Register of Historic Places*, 2011; *Creative Commons/Wikimedia*.

the country.”³⁴ At nearly 900 members, it was also one of the nation’s larger black churches.³⁵ As an indication of the congregation’s affluence and prestige, the new church building dedicated in 1926 at a total cost of \$175,000 was designed by Paul Williams, the most famous African American architect in the nation.³⁶ The sanctuary was large enough to accommodate roughly 2,000 people—a seating capacity that suggested church leaders’ intention to facilitate large gatherings beyond their own congregation.

Second Baptist was a key member of the city’s African American public sphere, which kept black dignity alive by countering white racial structures with an alternative public discourse of a truly

34. Flammig, *Bound for Freedom*, 111.

35. According to Henderson, *Journey*, 22. Even with substantial population growth in the U.S. between the 1940s and 1980s, black churches of more than 600 people were still relatively rare. See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 143.

36. “Negroes to Dedicate Edifice: Congregation Completes Building,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 3, 1926, II-3. It is located at 2412 Griffith Avenue, Los Angeles. During his half-century career, which began in an era when few blacks were architects, Williams designed over three thousand projects, many of them iconic public buildings and homes for famous residents in Los Angeles. See Shahshank Bengali, “Williams the Conqueror,” *USC Trojan Family Magazine* (Spring 2004), 27–35.

inclusive “common good.”³⁷ Before World War II, members of this community generally embraced a mild approach to civil rights, supporting the NAACP and a patient, long-term strategy while avoiding more aggressive actions that might exacerbate tensions with whites.³⁸ When the black community of upstart Los Angeles scored a major coup over more established communities by winning the right to host the NAACP national meeting in 1928, Second Baptist provided much of the meeting space.³⁹ The church enjoyed strong ties with *The California Eagle*, the pre-eminent black newspaper in mid-twentieth century Los Angeles. The paper’s founder, John J. Neimore, had been an active member of the church, as was his successor, Charlotta Bass.⁴⁰

Henderson and Second Baptist Church seemed a match made in heaven. Henderson’s acceptance of the call to the church created a buzz in L.A.’s black community.⁴¹ J. L. Caston, pastor of black Trinity Baptist, expressed his approval, calling Henderson “the most popular Baptist preacher in the U.S.”⁴² Even before he arrived, Henderson aimed to create a favorable impression by arranging to have his first sermon recorded from New York so it could be played for the church as he was en route. “By the time you hear this,” he announced with a dramatic flourish, “we’ll be motoring our way through the Midwest.”⁴³ Linking respectability and financial prudence as he had at New Rochelle, he made retiring the church’s debt one of his early goals. Little more than a year after arriving, he

37. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 27. On the black public sphere, see Higginbotham, 10–11.

38. Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 193, describes their approach as “pragmatic activism.”

39. *Ibid.*, 287–89.

40. *Ibid.*, 111. Charlotta Bass’s autobiography offers a glowing description of Second Baptist Church. Bass devoted nearly half of her chapter on “Negro Churches” to the church, nearly as much space as she devoted to every other church combined. Charlotta Bass, *Forty Years: Memoirs from the Pages of a Newspaper* (Los Angeles: Charlotta A. Bass, 1960). She also mistakenly identifies Second Baptist Church as the oldest black church in the city (First African Methodist Episcopal was actually earlier by several years). While undoubtedly an honest mistake, it may have been aided by zeal for her church. Bass, like Henderson, sought to shape black Angeleno culture to white middle-class standards of respectability. See Jennifer Mandel, “Setting the Record Straight: Almena Lomax, the *Los Angeles Tribune*, and a Lifelong Passion for Racial Justice and the Written Word,” *Southern California Quarterly* 98, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 59–105.

41. “New York Prelate Accepts Second Baptist’s Pulpit,” *California Eagle*, March 20, 1941, 4A.

42. “The Watch Tower,” *California Eagle*, April 24, 1941, 5B.

43. “Rev. Henderson, New Pastor of Second Baptist, in LA,” *California Eagle*, May 29, 1941, 1A.

announced a “\$55 in '44” campaign, which challenged each member of the congregation to commit at least \$55 during the year toward this goal. He took out a full-page advertisement in the *Eagle* to announce this campaign, suggesting that he thought solvency reflected well on the church’s reputation.⁴⁴

Early on, Henderson built ties with like-minded local pastors through regular pulpit sharing and participation in the National Baptist Convention’s regional affiliate. He was an active member of the local branch of the NAACP. The city’s branch president at the time, Thomas Griffith Jr., was a Second Baptist member and the son of Henderson’s predecessor, Thomas L. Griffith Sr., who had been pastor of Second Baptist from 1921 to 1941. Henderson took advantage of the relatively congenial attitude of local and state government officials towards African Americans to build bridges. During his tenure he invited many notable individuals to be guest speakers: Mayors Fletcher Bowron and Norris Poulson; Los Angeles County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn; Lieutenant Governor (and later Governor) of California, Goodwin Knight; Governor Earl Warren (later chief justice of the United States Supreme Court); Assistant Secretary of Defense James C. Evans; and many local professionals.⁴⁵ Henderson also oversaw the church’s modest annual donations to the Los Angeles Rescue Mission, the American Cancer Society, and the Red Cross as symbolic gestures of Second Baptist’s good citizenship in Los Angeles.⁴⁶ And he nurtured the church’s existing relationship with *The California Eagle*, which acted as both his mouthpiece and his champion, regularly publishing pieces about him or the church in addition to the regular advertisements for the church that Henderson placed in the paper.⁴⁷

Henderson embodied respectability, consciously attempting to shape the public’s perceptions of black clergy. In a manual directed to young ministers, he advised that “a minister’s clothes should

44. *California Eagle*, January 1, 1943, 5A.

45. Much later, he sent a warm letter of support to Edmund “Pat” Brown upon his election as governor, calling him “the right man for the job.” J. Raymond Henderson to Edmund Brown, March 3, 1959, Second Baptist Church Papers.

46. Second Baptist Church Papers, *passim*.

47. The close relationship between the *Eagle* and Second Baptist helps explain the more extensive coverage the paper provided to Henderson and his church. Reporting on Henderson in rival African American paper the *Los Angeles Sentinel* was more modest.



Reverend J. Raymond Henderson and his wife renewed their wedding vows on their fifteenth anniversary, September 26, 1962, followed by a reception at the Second Baptist Church. As in all known photographs of him, the minister was the picture of sartorial elegance, the embodiment of dignity, a conscious role model for black respectability. *Photograph by Charles Williams. Courtesy of the Tom & Ethel Bradley Center at California State University, Northridge.*

remain on the conservative side. This means black, oxford gray, or midnight blue suits. Shoes should be black. A robe is appropriate if he so chooses. He should never flash much jewelry, such as a diamond ring or a large cross, before the people. His dark socks should never be so short that the people can view his ashy, scarred, bony legs.”⁴⁸ He also wrote letters to the editor of *Ebony* to correct negative perceptions of ministers, including one in response to an article on “Ministers with Sex Appeal,” which had suggested that black ministers routinely engaged in drinking and poker-playing. Accusing *Ebony* of doing a disservice to black ministers and churches, he closed by reminding the editor that many white people read the magazine. Dishonoring

48. Henderson, “Mighty Rugged Road,” 32.

black ministers undermined black respectability in the white community, he charged.⁴⁹

Despite the largely blue-collar makeup of his congregation, he often delivered highbrow sermons that reinforced his authority by displaying his theological knowledge. His preaching combined theological orthodoxy, intellectual rigor, and oratorical skill. In one early sermon he “set up a thesis in sharp contrast to the Freudian thesis of religion as illusions, defending the proposition that man’s religion is not a mere product of fear and an attempt to secure the favor of the gods; neither is it a creature of culture, but it is rather an attempt to rationally interpret the riddle of the universe and is itself a creator of culture.” Referencing St. Francis, Gandhi, Bertrand Russell, Francis Bacon, William James, Erasmus, and Immanuel Kant, he concluded with a flourish: “There is no intellect, no science, no philosophy of government, no other great religion even competing to organize this entire world upon the basis of the Kingdom [of God] concept, except the Christian religion.”⁵⁰ In learnedly demonstrating Christianity’s relevance in the modern world, Henderson also personified educated black respectability.

LEADING THE DOUBLE V CAMPAIGN IN LOS ANGELES

For African Americans, World War II held out the prospect of unprecedented access to high-paying manufacturing jobs and the lifestyle that attended them. The war’s transformative possibilities inspired in Henderson a vision of expanding dignity and racial justice not only regionally, but nationally and internationally as well. Nowhere was the potential greater than in Los Angeles, one of the nation’s largest war production areas. World War II provided the nation’s blacks the opportunity to advance the recognition of their rights at home as they risked their lives defeating America’s enemies overseas. Civil rights activists referred to this two-pronged victory strategy as the “Double V” campaign. Black leader A. Philip Randolph’s threat of a massive March on Washington prompted President Franklin Roosevelt to announce Executive Order 8802, which established a Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) to ensure

49. J. Raymond Henderson to The Editor, *Ebony*, February 14, 1952, Second Baptist Church Papers.

50. “Religion Will Survive World Conflict, Says Rev. Henderson Sunday,” *California Eagle*, June 26, 1941, 1B.

that non-whites had equal access to manufacturing jobs in companies with federal government contracts. Enforcement largely relied on complaints from those excluded from work, so activism was required in each individual region. Southern California was a major hub of wartime industrial activity and blacks were woefully underrepresented in these occupations. Fully 10 percent of all federal funds spent during the war were poured into the state, nearly half of which went to the L.A. area. At its peak, the region's aircraft industry directly employed over 228,000 workers.⁵¹ In June 1941 only four African Americans were employed in Southern California's aerospace factories.⁵²

To support labor, Henderson opened his church sanctuary for political rallies, providing not only a practical gathering place, but a sacred space as well. Wuthnow argues that "sacredness inheres in the form" of churches, particularly those with grand architecture like Second Baptist, so that even non-religious activities that take place there "take on a certain air of sacredness."⁵³ As a pastor, his participation in protest activities imbued them with a transcendent purpose since, as Wuthnow points out, "even occasional references to the divine in otherwise secular" gatherings set them apart from everyday experience.⁵⁴ By conferring divine sanction on labor activities, Henderson helped legitimate them and to bring unions into the mainstream of black life. Rather than worrying that labor would taint Henderson's respectability, he used his respectability to confer legitimacy on union activities.

Henderson supported the local wartime civil rights struggle in various ways, but his decision to back the local branch of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was a militant strategy that tested the boundaries of respectability.⁵⁵ White business leaders in Los Angeles—a city notorious for its open-shop policies—were certainly critics, but many middle-class black Angelenos were also

51. See Arthur C. Verge, "The Impact of the Second World War on Los Angeles," *Pacific Historical Review* (August 1994), 305.

52. Kevin Starr, *Embattled Dreams: California in War and Peace, 1940–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 139.

53. Wuthnow, *Producing the Sacred*, 58.

54. *Ibid.*, 142–46.

55. David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 316; and Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 355.

wary of organized labor, especially left-leaning organizations.⁵⁶ In March 1943, Henderson sponsored a rally in support of the CIO with famed New York pastor A. Clayton Powell Jr. as the keynote speaker.⁵⁷ Before the war, the Los Angeles CIO had paid little attention to African Americans. But labor demands and black insistence on equal treatment forced the CIO to reinvent itself as a progressive interracial organization.⁵⁸ An *Eagle* editorial praised the unusual partnership between middle-class churches and leftist labor, proclaiming that it would “bring together for the first time not only active Negro organizations but spokesmen for labor and the churches from all sections of Los Angeles. It is this unity which will block the sabotage of victory which lurks behind every act of racial intolerance in the Los Angeles war industry.”⁵⁹ Indeed, unity did extend beyond wartime labor concerns. After the Zoot Suit riots, in which white sailors on shore leave sought out and beat Mexican youths, local leaders formed the Council for Civic Unity to help restore order. Henderson, local CIO president Philip Connelly, NAACP leader Thomas Griffith, and other area pastors served on the council.⁶⁰

In June 1943, Henderson announced the full cooperation of the Baptist Ministers Alliance in the FEPC investigation of Jim Crow union activities in the shipbuilding industry. Second Baptist hosted a mass meeting of shipyard workers lobbying for a thorough investigation.⁶¹ In September, Second Baptist hosted another rally attended by 1,500 essential war workers demanding “unity with trade unions, other minorities and white America generally in the struggle against Fifth Column Southernism today threatening Los Angeles.” Henderson, identified again by the *Eagle* as the “militant pastor” of Second Baptist, began the proceedings with an invocation. “We thank God for these people of different interests gathered here tonight to further the purpose of freedom,” he intoned, implicitly acknowledging the unusual alliance between religious, civic, and labor organizations that

56. Flammig, *Bound for Freedom*, 356.

57. “Dr. Powell Speaks for CIO Rally,” *California Eagle*, March 24, 1943, 1A.

58. Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 62–63.

59. “Production for Victory Conference Goal,” *California Eagle*, March 10, 1943, 8A.

60. Kevin Allen Leonard, “In the Interest of All the Races’: African Americans and Interracial Cooperation in Los Angeles During and After World War II,” in de Graaf, Mulroy, and Taylor, *Seeking El Dorado*, 320.

61. “F.E.P.C. Investigators Here to Investigate Shipyard Jim-Crow,” *California Eagle*, July 22, 1943, 1A.

he had helped to forge.⁶² His efforts on behalf of labor helped build a bridge between the older, more respectable individuals in the black community, a number of whom were members of Second Baptist, and the migrants who had recently arrived in pursuit of work.

Henderson and other black leaders in Los Angeles expressed their militancy on the national level as well. They organized several gatherings during the war to address concerns about the unjust treatment of blacks across the nation. In October 1942, Henderson sent a lengthy telegram to President Roosevelt in response to the lynching of three African Americans in Mississippi.⁶³ The following year, when race riots broke out in major industrial cities such as Chicago and Detroit, two thousand gathered at Second Baptist to denounce the violence.⁶⁴ Some protests highlighted the plight of black soldiers who, in risking their lives, were providing the most sacrificial service citizens could offer. Second Baptist served as the meeting place for an emergency NAACP rally to protest the most outrageous disparity between civic duty and the violation of rights: the lynching of black soldiers. Employing the language of civic responsibility, the *Eagle* noted that black soldiers “are making the supreme sacrifice for democracy, while they and their families are receiving none of the democracy which they are fighting for.”⁶⁵ The following year, Henderson supported a petition for equitable rest quarters for soldiers.⁶⁶ In these ways, Henderson linked the local black public community with a larger national network engaged in the same struggle for rights in the midst of a patriotic global struggle.

Henderson’s vision for the war extended beyond the nation’s borders. He perceived a historic opportunity to increase racial justice on a global scale. In 1943, he preached a sermon describing World War II as a “revolution” that “flowed from the desire for freedom on the part of all the people of the world.” He hoped the war would bring freedom to Africa and Asia, not just Europe. Racial conflicts were rooted in economic, rather than biological, realities and the only chance for postwar stability was an international organization that

62. “Mass Meet Launches Unity Drive,” *California Eagle*, September 16, 1943, 1A.

63. “Second Baptist in FDR Appeal,” *California Eagle*, October 22, 1942, 4A.

64. “Negroes Must Unify, Fight Riots—Russell,” *California Eagle*, July 1, 1943, A1.

65. “NAACP Drive Has Cracked 3,000 Mark—Onward!,” *California Eagle*, June 24, 1943, 3A.

66. “Negro Leader Protests Troops’ Rest Quarters,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 1944, 8.

would express “the solidarity and unity of the entire human race.” In the Popular Front era, when liberal and leftist groups banded together against fascism, Henderson clearly stated his opposition to Soviet-style communism, though he still expressed admiration for the Soviet Union’s struggle for “the abolition of racial exclusiveness, [and the] equality of nations and the integrity of territories.”⁶⁷ He participated in several activities with American Youth for Democracy, the youth division of the American Communist Party, including an essay contest in 1944 on the theme “Why Democracy Is Better Than Fascism.”⁶⁸ The Communist Party in the U.S. was one of the few non-black organizations to fully embrace racial equality in the 1930s and ’40s, so black leaders, including those in Los Angeles, often offered support for communism, the Soviet Union, or both.⁶⁹ Throughout the 1940s, the *Eagle’s* editorial policy ran parallel to the Communist Party line.⁷⁰ Henderson’s cautious praise of the Soviet Union did not therefore test the bounds of respectability within the black community. As long as the nation’s wartime alliance with the Soviet Union lasted and whites were focused on other concerns, his views remained unproblematic.

PURSUING CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE GLOBALIZED POSTWAR WORLD

In the decade after the war, Henderson’s advocacy routinely included national and international efforts that seemed relatively tame but began to jeopardize his respectability. Like other black leaders at the time, he embraced a vision of Pan-Africanism and came to see the fledgling United Nations as an important international forum for pursuing civil rights for blacks in the U.S. and around the world. NAACP President Walter White looked forward to the new international organization as a mechanism for destroying white supremacy.⁷¹ Henderson agreed. From the pulpit, he explicitly linked the global decolonization movement to the century-long fight for freedom in the U.S. Just as God “sent Mahatma Gandhi to deliver India from British

67. “‘Soviet Is Effective Society,’ Henderson,” *California Eagle*, November 18, 1943, 7.

68. See California Legislature, *Fourth Report of the Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, 1948: Communist Front Organizations* (1948), 185.

69. Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 141.

70. Leonard, “In the Interest,” 320.

71. Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 30.

imperialism,” he had sent contemporary civil rights leaders “to deliver the poor and oppressed minorities from the last vestiges of slavery to full freedom.”⁷²

Henderson’s long involvement in the national-level NAACP enabled him to build friendships with prominent civil rights leaders. As the war ended, Henderson hosted famed civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois at Second Baptist on behalf of the local branch of the NAACP, where he spoke about the United Nations Conference in San Francisco in which he had recently participated as an official consultant. Henderson wanted the public to hear about the efforts of leaders in this new international organization, which promised equality to all people and linked the struggle of colonized peoples with that of black Americans.⁷³

In 1946, Henderson invited Senator H. M. Basner, a member of the progressive minority party in the South African legislature, to speak to the Second Baptist congregation about the emerging policy of apartheid. Basner was in the U.S. to attend the UN General Assembly meeting regarding South African attempts to annex South West Africa, heretofore a South African protectorate under the League of Nations mandate system. The *Eagle* article describing Basner’s visit listed for its readers the states that had rejected the legality of South Africa’s annexation in violation of the UN Charter.⁷⁴ The U.S. was conspicuously absent from the list. South Africa had become an increasingly important American trade partner and ally in the emerging Cold War struggle, so the Truman Administration remained silent about the nation’s institutionalization of racism and expansionist policies to avoid offending its leaders.⁷⁵ But for black Americans, such violations of human rights trumped strategic foreign policy considerations. By giving Basner a public platform, Henderson invited L.A.’s black citizens to learn first-hand about a struggle analogous to their own—including the negligence of their own government in upholding the rights it espoused.

Criticism of President Truman’s policies became a major focus of the NAACP’s annual national meeting in 1949, held at Second

72. Henderson, “*Mighty Rugged Road*,” 160–61.

73. “Dr. DuBois, Conference Consultant, Here Sunday,” *California Eagle*, May 10, 1945, 1.

74. “Sen. Basner Will Talk at 2nd Baptist Ch.,” *California Eagle*, December 12, 1946, 1.

75. Borstelmann, *Cold War*, 73.



The NAACP's annual national meeting in 1949 was held at Second Baptist. Its pastor, Rev. J. Raymond Henderson, and other speakers criticized the Truman Administration's failure to deliver on election-year promises of civil rights legislation. In this July 14, 1949, photograph, Dr. Rayford W. Logan, of Howard University, addresses the delegates. *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* Collection, *Los Angeles Public Library*, 00060159.

Baptist. Henderson and others criticized the Truman Administration for failures that extended well beyond its Africa policies. Many Americans worried about Truman's Executive Order 9835, which instituted an arguably unconstitutional loyalty review program that violated the civil liberties of government employees. Historian Ellen Schrecker notes that this order legitimized "guilt by association," "a mechanistic method of tagging people by the groups and individuals they were connected to that, opponents of the loyalty program insisted, opened the way to considerable abuse."⁷⁶ Truman's restriction of civil liberties joined with his failure to deliver on election-year promises of civil rights legislation. Truman had campaigned on civil

76. Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (New York: Little, Brown, & Co., 1998), 276.

rights in 1948 and had taken an important step in July of that year with Executive Order 9981, which abolished discrimination in the armed forces. Still, civil rights leaders were frustrated that he had been unable to get any civil rights legislation through Congress. In response to Truman's sins of commission and omission, the NAACP convention adopted a unanimous resolution condemning him and Congress for its "betrayal." If conservatives linked civil rights agitation with subversive disloyalty, the NAACP turned the tables and argued that failure to support civil rights and instituting loyalty checks were the truly un-American activities.⁷⁷

That October, the tensions between black and white views of respectability played out in dramatic fashion on the local level in a debate over civil liberties, civil rights, and communism. Black leaders in Los Angeles arranged to have famed singer and communist Paul Robeson perform. Henderson, who was master of ceremonies for the event, invited Robeson to Second Baptist before his performance. Henderson's hospitality to Robeson was sure to enrage white Americans in the prevailing political climate. Denunciation of communism, muted during the war due to the U.S. alliance with the Soviet Union, had roared back to life. In 1947, Truman had announced his doctrine of "containing" communist expansion. Later that year, Los Angeles had been the focus of national attention when the Hollywood Ten were held in contempt of Congress for refusing to answer questions about communist activities in the film industry. And less than two weeks before the Robeson performance, Truman had publicly revealed the successful Soviet testing of an atomic bomb.

In this setting, the Los Angeles City Council decried the decision to host a public performance by a known radical. The council passed a resolution attempting to block the event and, when that failed, urged people not to attend. Before the concert, Henderson, outraged at the attack on such a prominent artist, denounced the council for squelching free speech and warned council members that they would all be recalled in the next election. In part as a result of Henderson's outspoken praise and advocacy for Robeson, the city's African American residents ignored the council's admonitions. Seventeen thousand

77. "Truman and 81st Congress Condemned for Betrayal of People on Civil Liberties," *California Eagle*, July 21, 1949, 1.

turned out to hear Robeson perform. Robeson, in turn, praised Henderson and other ministers, proclaiming, "Wherever I have gone in this country, there is always a church open to carry the struggle for the Negro." Although praise from such a prominent figure increased Henderson's stature in the African American community, Robeson's identity as a communist simultaneously undermined his respectability in the eyes of the white community.⁷⁸

Black overseas missionary work represented another front in the fight for respectability. In 1949, Henderson, an enthusiastic supporter of black Baptist missions, proposed to lead a trip to Africa with a group of ministers to visit Baptist mission churches and schools. Originally partnering with white organizations, by the turn of the twentieth century black churches had largely developed their own mission activities in reaction to experiences of subtle condescension or outright racism from their white brothers and sisters in Christ.⁷⁹ Through health, education, job training, and social reform efforts, missionaries sought to raise Africans to contemporary Western standards.⁸⁰ And through their heroic sacrifice in difficult locales, black missionaries sought social approval from both black and white Christians.⁸¹

Henderson's ability to garner support for this ambassadorial trip stemmed from his long-term involvement in the national-level National Baptist Convention (NBC), a key member of the national black public sphere. Through denominational activities, Henderson had formed a friendship with C. C. Adams, the NBC's director of missions.⁸² Wuthnow argues that missionary organizations have historically constituted "one of the major ways in which the sacred was made public," and that hierarchical religious institutions like the NBC made this expensive overseas work possible.⁸³ As with his World War II support for the CIO, Henderson positioned himself

78. "17,000 Hear Robeson in Concert Here, *California Eagle*, October 6, 1949, 1.

79. Martin, *Black Baptists*, 52, 72.

80. Sylvia M. Jacobs, "The Historical Role of Afro-Americans in American Missionary Efforts in Africa," in Jacobs, ed., *Black Americans*, 22; Martin, *Black Baptists*, 11.

81. Jacobs, "The Historical Role," in Jacobs, ed., *Black Americans*, 18; Donald F. Roth, "The 'Black Man's Burden': The Racial Background of Afro-American Missionaries and Africa," in *Ibid.*, 32; and Walter L. Williams, "The Missionary: Introduction," in *Ibid.*, 132.

82. C. C. Adams, *Report of Second Trip to Africa* (National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., 1947).

83. Wuthnow, *Producing the Sacred*, 76.

as a leader of public religion, as his concern for human dignity and freedom helped turn a missionary visit into a civil rights battle. His journey had no explicit political agenda, but he could not help but sympathize with black Africans experiencing oppression at the hands of white Europeans. During his visit, he expressed support for the decolonization movement, meeting with members of the Nigerian Liberation movement and observing native Gold Coast members of the Legislature in assembly with their British counterparts.⁸⁴ After his return, he lambasted the foreign policy of Britain, the U.S.'s strongest Cold War ally. He delivered a series of lectures to L.A.-area audiences, announcing that "the British watchdogs are determined to keep Africans in subjection to British rule, and slaves in their own land and country," so they "never expose the natives to any outside influence that may perhaps awaken greater interest in the world struggle for freedom and peace that has already taken root in Africa."⁸⁵

Black commentators enthusiastically affirmed Henderson's link between the church and Africa's democratic future. One editorial in the *Eagle* connected Henderson's trip with a report by leftist Howard University professor Alphaeus Hunton, a key supporter of pan-Africanism and critic of international capitalism.⁸⁶ But although Henderson seemed to endorse revolutionary movements, he was always careful to avoid Hunton's Marxist language. And beyond his denunciations of British administration of Nigeria, he offered little in the way of tangible support for decolonization. His attention to overseas missions was often consumed by much more mundane administrative matters. He personally oversaw a project to finance and build a permanent church home for a black Baptist missionary in Nicaragua, which turned out to be a tremendous drain on his time and energy, as the minister there ignored Henderson's detailed instructions on building plans and materials, while continuing to request additional funds.⁸⁷ In the end, conventional middle-

84. "The Sidewalk," *California Eagle*, April 20, 1950, 1.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid.

87. Between 1950 and 1952, Henderson sent at least thirty letters to the missionary, D. A. Timpson, as well as to ministers, wholesalers, the Tampa Chamber of Commerce, the Managua mayor, and Timpson's wife. See, e.g., J. Raymond Henderson to D. A. Timpson, October 24, 1950; J. Raymond Henderson to D. A. Timpson, May 8, 1951; J. Raymond Henderson to C. C. Adams, September 19, 1951; J. Raymond Henderson to Tampa Chamber of Commerce, October 19, 1951; J. Raymond Henderson to Concrete Equipment Company, November 2, 1951; J. Raymond Henderson to C. C.

class concerns about financial prudence and good stewardship characterized his involvement with missions more than strategies for liberation.

As the Cold War intensified in the late 1940s, Henderson became increasingly concerned about his standing in the white community. Even before the dustup over Robeson's performance, Henderson had been named as a member of a communist front organization in California State Senator Jack Tenney's report on subversive activities. Tenney had supervised several investigations of supposed communist-front organizations and their supporters, and then he had named names. In 1949, Herbert Biberman, one of the Hollywood Ten, reached out privately to Henderson for support during his trial. Henderson and Biberman knew each other from American Youth for Democracy activities.⁸⁸ It is not clear what kind of assistance Biberman hoped for. Whatever the details, after "mature reflection" Henderson decided to have "no active interest in the case," despite his sympathy for Biberman and the larger issue. Henderson cited worries about obtaining a passport for his planned Africa missionary trip, but he almost certainly worried about his reputation more generally were he to publicly support such a controversial figure, especially after the Robeson episode.⁸⁹ Suspicions about his communist sympathies lingered despite his circumspection. In 1952, apparently on the advice of legal counsel, Henderson wrote a curt letter to the city's Civil Service Commission requesting a formal list of organizations defined as subversive by the Attorney General.⁹⁰ He sent a similarly terse letter to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, noting "I have been through the years a constant opponent of Communism and have publicly urged others to have nothing to do with any disloyal group within our country."⁹¹ Both letters conveyed his frustration with his inability to establish definitively the charges against him and thus to demonstrate his respectability beyond question.

Adams, November 2, 1951; J. Raymond Henderson to C. C. Adams, November 20, 1951; J. Raymond Henderson to C. C. Adams, August 12, 1952, Second Baptist Church Papers.

88. California Legislature, *Fourth Report*, 183.

89. J. Raymond Henderson to Herbert Biberman, December 7, 1949, Second Baptist Church Papers.

90. J. Raymond Henderson to Civil Service Commission, May 21, 1952, Second Baptist Church Papers.

91. J. Raymond Henderson to Federal Bureau of Investigation, May 8, 1952, Second Baptist Church Papers.

In the face of growing accusations against supposed communist sympathizers, Henderson felt the need to burnish his anti-communist credentials publicly. His efforts to demonstrate his bona fides as a patriotic American citizen reflected a common experience for African Americans during the Cold War. Andrew Michael Manis points out the double standard black Christians faced at a time when Christianity and good citizenship were often assumed to be coextensive. Given their dissatisfaction with the nation's status quo, black Americans had to defend their basic loyalty to the nation to an extent that whites did not, as whites' loyalty was taken for granted. Understandably, black Christians were more ambivalent in their patriotic enthusiasm than their white counterparts, as the vision of a Christian nation was for them an unfulfilled promise.⁹² In 1954, Henderson affirmed his patriotism as he proclaimed himself "the only Negro minister in the city who constantly reminds his congregation of the perils of Communism," conveniently forgetting his earlier support for radical figures and his qualified praise of the Soviet Union.⁹³ In a February sermon, "The Terrors of Communism," he warned the church: "Have nothing to do with Communism or Communists. If you have, through mistake, been a member of any subversive organization, drop out at once. If you are a loyal American, say so, and don't hesitate to sign a loyalty oath." Henderson patriotically proclaimed that "with all its imperfections, America is the best country on earth," an assessment that may have seemed more authoritative to those who knew the extent of his global travel.⁹⁴

Henderson's concession to anti-communist forces represented a clear change in position from the anti-Truman rally he had sponsored five years earlier. As the Red Scare made any criticism of the U.S. seem disloyal, civil rights advocates had to bend over backwards to affirm their civic credentials. The church also ran an advertisement in the *Los Angeles Times* which explicitly rejected the link between civil rights advocacy and radicalism. The advertisement announced that "Dr. Henderson says, 'Both communism and Race

92. Andrew Michael Manis, *Civil Religions in Conflict: Black and White Baptists and Civil Rights, 1947-1957* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 50.

93. "Pastor Tells Flock of Communism's Evils," *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1954, A3.

94. *Ibid.*

Prejudice are Cancerous.’”⁹⁵ This advertisement appeared only in the city’s leading paper read by whites, not in the *Eagle*. Clearly, Henderson’s non-communist credentials were in question only by white audiences.

SUPPORTING THE STRUGGLE IN THE SOUTH

The growth of the civil rights movement in the South during the 1950s provided Henderson an opportunity to renew support for national efforts as he had done during World War II. His involvement in the national movement again struck a balance between respectability and militancy: he vigorously supported the controversial direct action movement led by King and others, steering assistance through reputable channels—the NAACP, speaking tours, and especially financial support—while avoiding direct participation in protests himself. Although less glamorous than marching, fundraising was essential for the movement’s success. As an experienced pastor, he knew the value of fiscal responsibility. He also recognized that charitable giving was most effective at the congregational level.⁹⁶ Since a church’s financial soundness depended entirely on voluntary giving, effective leadership demanded great skill in persuading congregations to give to causes they viewed as important. And Henderson was quite skilled in this art.

Throughout the 1950s, Henderson also made Second Baptist available as a meaningful gathering place for the local black community to express solidarity with the national struggle. In 1955, fourteen-year old Emmett Till, a Chicago boy visiting relatives in Mississippi, was beaten to death for whistling at a white woman. This brutal violence prompted outrage from African American communities and their supporters around the country. An impromptu L.A. rally drew more than five thousand people into Second Baptist, while police turned away an additional three thousand would-be attendees.⁹⁷ Henderson delivered the podium to his colleague, black Los Angeles physician Theodore Howard, to clinically describe the sufferings Till endured, which prompted spontaneous moaning and

95. Advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1954, A2.

96. Wuthnow, *Producing the Sacred*, 48 and 46.

97. “More Miss. Violence, Dr. Howard Predicts,” *California Eagle*, October 13, 1955, 1.

weeping throughout the audience. When organizers announced a voluntary offering to support voting rights organizers in Mississippi, attendees spontaneously gave a staggering \$6200.⁹⁸ Thus, even without using his oratorical gifts, Henderson helped to organize a sacred public ritual at a very crucial moment, bringing a measure of good out of a great tragedy.

Three months later, Rosa Parks's arrest launched the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Through his pastorate at Wheat Street in Atlanta in the 1930s, Henderson had established a friendship with Martin Luther King Sr., and through annual NBC gatherings, he had also become acquainted with King's son.⁹⁹ Henderson staunchly supported the younger King, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), and King's strategy of non-violent direct action—in spite of critics within the NBC who desired a more cautious approach to civil rights. More than a year after the boycott began, Henderson wrote privately to King, describing himself as the “informal west coast MIA representative” who traveled to other black churches showing film footage of church bombings and raising funds.¹⁰⁰ Henderson sponsored a fundraising effort to aid black communities in the South affected by the violent white backlash to the boycott. He traveled to Alabama to deliver the funds personally in a goodwill tour. This gesture may not seem especially risky, but he had to wave off concerns about his safety to make the trip.¹⁰¹ He wrote to NAACP executive director Roy Wilkins, another colleague he had long known through his work with the national organization, offering to make Second Baptist a national role model. “I am willing for our church,” he said, “to be spoken of as an example of what can be done, if the minister takes the lead.”¹⁰²

Henderson also took advantage of his relationship with King to build enthusiasm in Los Angeles for the national civil rights movement, in effect bringing local blacks into the larger community created by the boycotts King led. King accepted Henderson's

98. Ibid.

99. J. Raymond Henderson to Martin Luther King Sr., May 12, 1955, Martin Luther King Papers Project and J. Raymond Henderson to Martin Luther King Jr., May 12, 1955, Martin Luther King Papers Project.

100. J. Raymond Henderson to Martin Luther King Jr., April 24, 1957, Second Baptist Church Papers.

101. Advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1957, 11.

102. J. Raymond Henderson to Roy Wilkins, November 7, 1957, Second Baptist Church Papers.

invitation to preach at Second Baptist in February 1958.¹⁰³ King's keynote helped to launch a three-part NAACP strategy for Los Angeles: a voter registration drive aiming to register 50,000 new African American voters, a boycott against Budweiser beer for refusing to employ blacks, and a local NAACP membership drive. Henderson initiated the NAACP drive with dramatic flair, personally garnering 500 new NAACP memberships and launching a plan to raise \$10,000 from within Second Baptist as part of a larger nationwide fundraising vision.¹⁰⁴ The membership drive reflected an intensification of his long-term effort to democratize civil rights engagement by encouraging lay people to join an organization whose membership in the mid-1950s included less than 1 percent of the nation's black population.¹⁰⁵ Henderson's fundraising pledge meant that one individual church would contribute a full 10 percent to the total national goal. Despite Second Baptist's relative prosperity, this sum still required sacrificial giving by church members, which for some undoubtedly challenged the financial security that underlay middle-class respectability. Henderson had to woo such congregants to take personal risks for a greater cause. And he lobbied pastors across the country to rally their own congregations in an effort to achieve the nation-wide goal.

Henderson also provided support to non-violent student protesters. In 1960, students from Nashville launched sit-ins in non-violent protest against segregated lunch counters. In retaliation, angry whites bombed the home of one of the lawyers for the protesters. In a show of solidarity, the black community of Los Angeles hosted a massive rally, with a turnout of 5,000 people, on May Day at Grand Olympic Auditorium. Henderson, master of ceremonies, introduced keynote speaker Thurgood Marshall, famed attorney for the *Brown* case. Marshall called for more African Americans to follow the militant example of younger activists, who were less cautious than those of his own generation. Henderson, then in his sixties and ten years Marshall's senior, was also implicated by this admission of caution. In its coverage of the event, the *Eagle* gave unintentional support to the view

103. "Don't Get Weary,' Rev. King Advises Overflow Audience," *California Eagle*, February 27, 1958, 1.

104. "Rev. Henderson to Raise \$100,000 for NAACP Fund," *California Eagle*, March 6, 1958, 3, and various letters, Second Baptist Church Papers.

105. Morris, *Origins*, 123.

that Henderson might have supported the movement more aggressively than he did. In lauding him as a “Home Front Hero” for civil rights, the *Eagle* acknowledged that, while playing a crucial support role, he had not been on the movement’s front lines.¹⁰⁶

The following year, Henderson offered support to young civil rights activists engaged in the Freedom Rides. In an attempt to test a federal law invalidating segregation in interstate transportation, the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) organized groups of white and black young people to ride on busses together from Washington, DC, to New Orleans. When members of CORE decided to call off the rides after several acts of violence, veterans of the Nashville sit-ins decided to pick up the torch. The Freedom Riders Coordinating Committee called for regular waves of new riders throughout June, July, and August of 1961. Henderson sponsored a rally at Second Baptist to fund a new cohort of riders from the L.A. area. Ultimately, the church raised enough funds to support a dozen “twentieth century disciples of racial equality,” as Second Baptist’s newsletter called them. With great fanfare, they departed by bus from Second Baptist, bound for Jackson, Mississippi, in July of 1961.¹⁰⁷ Henderson’s stance toward the Freedom Rides again suggests an attempt to balance respectability and militancy. He unequivocally endorsed the efforts of a courageous group of individuals whose provocative strategy was deemed unwise even by some supporters of the movement.¹⁰⁸ But he maintained a cautious distance, as he seems not to have inspired any members of his own church to participate.

As Henderson neared the end of his career, the fragility of respectability became apparent when opportunities for prestigious public service evaporated, as old rumors that he harbored communist sympathies came back to haunt him. In 1959, newly-elected governor Edmund “Pat” Brown reached out to Henderson indicating that he had been placed on a list for possible service. Nothing ever came of this ostensible offer. Though there is no evidence linking the lack of an offer to Henderson’s reputed previous communist sympathies, it

106. “Youth Shows Way, Marshall Tells Meeting,” *California Eagle*, May 5, 1960, 1.

107. “Second Baptist Freedom Riders Off to Mississippi,” *Sunday School Informer* (July, 1961), Second Baptist Church Papers.

108. Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 283.

seems likely that Brown would have been guided in his appointments by advice from leaders in the L.A. area and lingering suspicions about Henderson could not have helped his case.¹⁰⁹ Two years later, Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty offered Henderson a position on the Los Angeles Civil Service Commission, designed to prevent corruption in municipal hiring. Yorty's announcement of the first African American appointee to this prestigious position prompted front-page coverage from the *Eagle*, which pointed out that the African American community had been lobbying for a black member on the committee for years.¹¹⁰ An *Eagle* editorial the same day echoed this sentiment, praising Yorty for addressing the "cherished aim of the community for many years" by its appointment. The editorial praised the choice of Henderson in particular, "one of the city's most useful citizens." The selection deserved "the sincere congratulations of all of those who believe that democracy is best served by a recognition that all citizens should share the responsibilities of self-government."¹¹¹

But Henderson abruptly and unexpectedly turned the position down.¹¹² In private to Yorty, an unnamed opponent had dragged up Henderson's putative communist past, in effect pressuring Yorty to publicly retract his offer. Yorty then shared this information with Henderson. To preempt public humiliation, Henderson agreed to decline the invitation to serve. But privately to Yorty he protested the unsupported allegations that called his loyalty into question. Charged with "guilt by association" for hosting the 1949 concert for Paul Robeson, Henderson explained his interest in Robeson as an artist, not as an outspoken communist. And he criticized the mayor's office for taking at face value quotes from the Communist *People's World* about Henderson as evidence of his guilt, as he had never had any association with organized communist groups, his participation in American Youth for Democracy notwithstanding. Henderson did not want to embarrass Yorty or to "publicly endanger [his] reputation built up over a period of twenty years in [the] community."¹¹³ So what would have been a fitting culmination to a career marked by

109. J. Raymond Henderson to Edmund Brown, March 3, 1959, Second Baptist Church Papers.

110. "Civil Service Post Given to Dr. Henderson," *California Eagle*, July 27, 1961, 1.

111. See "New Civil Service Commissioner," *California Eagle*, July 27, 1961, 4.

112. "Henderson Out, Henri O'Bryant, Houston Picked," *California Eagle*, August 10, 1961, 1.

113. J. Raymond Henderson to Samuel Yorty, August 15, 1961, Second Baptist Church Papers.

civic respectability was not to be. Henderson must have seethed over the realization that efforts to publicly repudiate unfounded accusations would do more to tarnish his respectability than a humiliating capitulation.

CONCLUSION

Henderson's last public involvement with civil rights revealed the waning viability of his approach. A confrontation took place between police and members of the Nation of Islam outside a Los Angeles mosque on April 27, 1962. In the ensuing gun battle, six individuals were injured and one was killed.¹¹⁴ Tensions quickly flared between black community members and local officials. The following month, Henderson once again offered Second Baptist as a sacred space for protest, despite the fact that in this case his religious and political views diverged sharply from those of the offended party. Henderson hoped the gathering would calm tension, but he underestimated his guests. Nation of Islam spokesman Malcolm X, who showed up at the event, seemed to incite outrage purposely. "They say we preach hate because we tell the truth. They say we inflame the Negro. The hell they've been catching for 400 years has inflamed them . . . If we don't hate the white man, then you don't know what you're talking about." Henderson felt compelled to rebut Malcolm X's speech. Spontaneously addressing the crowd, he explained that he had only offered the church as a forum for a "peaceful assembly." Acknowledging that it would be foolish to deny the existence of police brutality, he nevertheless asserted that "we are here to find a positive, affirmative solution. Not to indulge in hate—of anyone or any organization. Let's keep that in mind."¹¹⁵ The meeting illustrated the growing fissures among various civil rights activists in the early 1960s and the increasing militancy of some groups. Though Henderson had long been a "militant" advocate for civil rights, he never countenanced armed protest.

The following year, Henderson ended his twenty-two-year pastorate at Second Baptist Church and his career. Though recent tensions likely confirmed the wisdom of his decision, he had long

114. Gene Sherman, "Muslims Push Brutality Issue," *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1962, 2.

115. "1,200 Negroes Charge Police with Brutality," *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 1962, 2; Grace E. Simon, "I Killed Stokes, Says Officer; Rally Packed," *California Eagle*, May 17, 1962, 1.

planned to retire in 1963 when he reached sixty-five years of age. During those two decades, he had journeyed far both literally and metaphorically. Second Baptist spared no expense in honoring their long-time pastor. The program for the celebration was printed as a glossy commemorative brochure, complete with a detachable portrait of the pastor suitable for framing. Having grown up in poverty, Henderson was now being feted at the Beverly Hilton. He had indisputably achieved the dignified upper middle-class status denied to so many African Americans.¹¹⁶

Throughout his career, he had doggedly advocated for civil rights in Los Angeles, from early in World War II to the height of the Kennedy Cold War, fighting on local, national, and international fronts. His adopted city placed him in a unique position within the civil rights movement. If Los Angeles had never been the Garden of Eden, it at least afforded black ministers a stable, vigorous, prosperous black public sphere from which they could confront injustice at all these geographical levels. Black churches provided essential infrastructure—financial, institutional, theological, and ideological—to support lobbying for greater equality. As a pastor, Henderson commanded personal, moral, spiritual, and financial authority unsurpassed by secular leaders. His militancy was crucial to the success of protests in Los Angeles, across the nation, and in Africa. At the same time, respectability's demand for appropriate comportment, decorum, and morality—felt most acutely by black pastors as community leaders and role models—limited Henderson's willingness, even his ability, to engage in more radical measures. This was true with respect to direct action campaigns in the U.S. and in calls for decolonization, where a focus on pragmatic issues of economic and foreign policy fostered a muted approach towards colonial demands for autonomy. And the Red Scare illustrated the precariousness of "militant respectability," forcing Henderson into a defensive posture and later denying him a prestigious civic position.

Given these constraints, it is difficult to see how Henderson and his colleagues could have done more. And yet it had not been nearly enough. Two years after Henderson's retirement, the California Highway Patrol arrested 21-year-old Marquette Frye, a black man, at an intersection in Watts, six miles due south of Second Baptist.

116. Retirement Program, Second Baptist Church Papers.

African Americans frustrated with pervasive racism and inequality launched a week-long wave of rioting. Dozens died, more than 1,000 were injured, and over 3,000 were arrested as a result of the Watts Riots. Though Henderson and his colleagues had made substantial progress on the road to equality, the outrage revealed by the riots suggests the limits of respectable militancy. Henderson's words from more than a decade earlier continued to resonate: there still remained a "distance yet to be travelled before the day of our complete freedom."¹¹⁷

117. J. Raymond Henderson to E.I. Robinson, May 28, 1951, Second Baptist Church Papers.