

Captive church

by [Lovett H. Weems Jr.](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

*The Last Days: A Son's Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of a New South* by Charles Marsh

Lillian Smith once described the religion of her southern childhood as "triangulated on sin, sex and segregation." Charles Marsh, associate professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia and author of *God's Long Summer* (Princeton University Press, 1999), interweaves a variety of stories about two of those topics (with a little of the third thrown in) into an intriguing narrative.

The son of the pastor of First Baptist Church in Laurel, Mississippi, Marsh takes us to the heart of southern Protestantism as it was in the late 1960s--to its racism, fundamentalism and resistance to change. The Jesus who broke rules and pushed boundaries was not part of the gospel on which Marsh was reared. Fundamentalism was not considered one approach to faith; it was seen as the only way to God. Those of us who lived in that culture know how thoroughly this theology permeated the society at large.

Despite resistance, radical changes had taken place during the decade. The 1964 Civil Rights Act opened the doors to public accommodations for African-Americans. The 1965 Voting Rights Act gave them the franchise. Then, in 1969, "overnight" change came to every community in the South when the *Alexander v. Holmes County* court decision mandated unitary public school systems.

It would be easy to see the resistance to these changes as a southern phenomenon. When he headed the Urban League, Whitney Young used to say that liberalism grows with one's distance from the problem. The resistance Marsh describes is endemic to times of social upheaval, even for people of faith--perhaps especially for people of faith.

The white church was of little help during those years. The worlds of whites and blacks were so far apart that there was no basis for common work during that time of crisis. Though fair-minded white clergy and laity did make a faithful witness, their efforts took place within such a constricted social context that the results tended to

be marginal at best, even when those involved paid a high price for their courage.

Marsh's story reminds us of the heroic witness of African-American clergy. The Allen Johnsons and Marcus Cooleys of his town had counterparts in every community in Mississippi. They endured limited opportunities, abuse and violence. Yet they remained prophets of reconciliation, sought a better life for all children and lived to get a small glimpse of the promised land they preached.

Above all, this book is a story of the author's father. Bob Marsh was a rising star among Baptist preachers. Handsome and with an earned doctorate, he was exactly the kind of pastor that prestigious churches sought. He saw his call to be pastor of First Baptist Church in "lavish Laurel" Mississippi as the "opportunity of a lifetime." It meant going back home to Mississippi to a very "significant" pulpit in the town that had produced the Metropolitan Opera star Leontyne Price. It had also produced Sam Bowers, Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

Bob Marsh's experiences at Laurel nearly broke him as a person and a pastor. After only five months he said, "I don't know how much more I can take." He was neither a racist nor a crusader. Social problems, he thought, were the result of moral breakdown, not of unjust systems. Like the clergy to whom Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from a Birmingham jail, he could not see beyond the chaos and disruption that the civil rights movement "caused."

In a terrible and pivotal incident, Marsh spoke by invitation at the presentation of a major civic award to a prominent community member, then found out later that evening that the recipient had been arrested for participating in a fire bombing. Marsh felt used and betrayed. He became deeply depressed.

But in the midst of his despair, a new chapter of his life opened. The Marsh family went to California for a month, where they met Jesus People who were "free" but still shared an evangelical faith. The experience changed Bob Marsh, and he returned to Laurel determined to do things differently. The "suffocating theology of the closed society . . . had now to be pushed aside," his son writes. But such defiance of convention is hard for someone who stands at the center of local culture. Marsh was never able fully to realize his new freedom because he was hindered by the sheer compromises that go with maintaining a Baptist pulpit. Without being able to change his social location, he "did the best he could."

Flannery O'Connor once said that the South was "Christ-haunted if not Christ-centered." In *The Last Days* this haunting takes the form of a fundamentalism that is powerless to cast out entrenched social demons. This love story of a father and a son is embedded in an intense and passionate land where virtues and vices are never far apart. Its record of growth, though imperfect and achieved only through great struggle, offers hope to culturally captive people of faith in all regions.