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Taylor University's Black Cultural Society in the 1970s

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HED 550 History and Foundations of Higher Education

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In the last several decades, Taylor University has encouraged strong community and has boasted a strong sense of Christian fellowship. Even amidst institutional, societal, and global changes, Taylor has worked to maintain a sense of inclusion among students. One of the ways in which students strived to improve the campus community was through the Black Cultural Society during the late 1970s. This group, formed in 1974, worked to educate the student body about black history and culture. Through both trials and support, the group maintained a goal of increasing the influence of black students on Taylor's campus through events, meetings, and most importantly, Black History Week. Understanding the day's societal characteristics and Taylor's leadership provide a framework for visualizing the Black Cultural Society in its beginning years. In this report, I will discuss the cultural moment of the late 1970s at Taylor University, the establishment of the Black Cultural Society, and the implications of this time period on Taylor's history.

Dr. Robert Baptista started as Taylor University's 11th president on July 1st, 1975 (LeSourd, 1975, p. 1). Baptista succeeded President Milo Rediger who left a strong, lasting impact on the university. Following the legendary Milo Rediger, Baptista had large shoes to fill and set the tone for his presidency in his inaugural address. In the speech, Baptista claimed that one of Taylor's core goals strived to "provide opportunities for young people to learn--to learn about themselves-- about the world in which they live--to learn how to learn and how to use what is learned" (Baptista, 1975). Along with other core goals, Baptista cited an expected outcome of Taylor's efforts to be the preparation of its students for life after college. He hoped that students might leave Taylor fully equipped "to live as effective Christians in a world that is hostile, confused, and yet hungry for a better way" (Baptista, 1975).

American society experienced noticeable shifts in the higher education system during the late 1970s. Just over a decade before this era, the United States underwent reformation in the form of the Civil Rights Act. This legislation had a major impact on higher education as it prohibited discrimination and promoted the desegregation of schools. Because of Taylor's foundation and predominately white history, the 1970s proved to be a crucial time to truly prove the institutional support of the Civil Right Act. Especially as a Christian institution, the years of 1974-1977 were very formative and vital in the support of students of color at Taylor University. In examining artifacts from this time period, one finds student opinions that share multiple perspectives and thoughts on the matter. Additionally, the establishment of the Black Cultural Society had a strong impact on the student body. These events greatly influenced Taylor's institutional focus as the group challenged the larger student body with thoughts and concerns surrounding Civil Rights and full equality.

In the 1973-1974 academic school year, Taylor students formed that Black Student Organization (Taylor University Ilium, 1974, p. 119). At the time, the group sought to "promote an awareness of the black culture and its needs..." (Taylor University Ilium, 1974, p. 119) and included an element of outreach to other black students. Just one year later, the group changed its name to Black Cultural Society and released a written constitution in 1975. The society's stated organizational goal was to "ameliorate the economic, academic, religious, and social environment of Taylor University so as to make it more conducive to the needs of Taylor Black students" (Black Cultural Society Constitution, 1975). Over the next few years, the group worked to establish Black History Week in February of every Spring semester. The motives behind this program included educating the entire student body about black history, drawing attention to the past and current struggles of black students, and paving a smoother path for

future students of Taylor University, both black and white. These motives and perspectives are seen in writings included in *The Echo* student newspaper.

Understanding the makeup of the Black Cultural Society and their efforts on campus provides a helpful framework to learn about the group's history. In 1975, 20 American ethnic black students were enrolled at Taylor as well as five international black students. Over the next four years, both of these numbers decreased until Taylor could only claim four American ethnic black students and four international black students (Statistical Analysis of Enrollment: 1975-1979). Because of the time period and cultural climate, the group was determined to positively influence the campus through their efforts. Black History Week in 1976-1977 typically involved a chapel takeover for the week where the Black Cultural Society invited guests and students to speak. Despite being well-intentioned, Black History Week at Taylor resulted in varied responses and perspectives from Taylor students.

Leading up to Black History Week in February of 1976, *The Echo* published an article titled "Blacks Debate Bicentennial Celebration." The article discussed differing opinions on the planned celebration of black history in America. First, writer Sybil Cross presented the perspective of Black Americans who did not find the country's 200th birthday worthy of their celebration (Cross, 1975, p. 3). She cited reasons for this dissent toward the celebration of liberty and freedom as a feeling of hypocrisy. Blacks were not originally brought to America so that they could enjoy freedom as slaves (Cross, 1975, p. 3). Cross suggested that "Many blacks look at the situation of blacks in America today and wonder if any progress has really been made. There is more discrimination on the basis of color than in any other country in the world" (Cross, 1975, p. 3). To counter this perspective, Cross also presented an opposite perspective. In the spirit of moving forward and releasing past pain, other Black Americans supported the

bicentennial celebration with the goal of recognizing Blacks' contributions to the country (Cross, 1975, p. 3). Cross demonstrated the celebration's potential to show the world Black America's accomplishments and to work toward a better future.

Continuing in this theme of differing perspectives, *The Echo* published student opinion articles in February of 1976 about the Black Cultural Society and Black History Week. In one section of the newspaper titled "Black History Week-Meaningful or a Sham?," student writer John Jones wrote about the debate on celebrating black history in the form of an open conversation between friends. One of the article's main concerns presented the idea of increased polarization encouraged by the week-long celebration. Jones responded to this claim by writing that "Black History Week provides a forum for revealing true attitudes, thereby leading to a better understanding of one another" (Jones, 1976, p. 2). Additionally, Jones critiqued the proposed assumption that Christianity is synonymous with an unprejudiced view of race and color. After a few supplementary arguments concerning the merit and purpose of the radical teaching and worship style of the celebration week, Jones responded to the overall dissent expressed by the student in the article. He stated, "It is apparent that unless one is physically and mentally experiencing the trials and problems of a person, he can never fully understand!" (Jones, 1976, p. 2).

Following this article in *The Echo*, another student presented an opposing and more negative view of Black History Week. Phillip Kamm Madeira commented on the week's chapel speakers noting that, for him, the program was not productive in uniting the student body and eradicating the sense of prejudice and racism on campus (Madeira, 1976, p. 2). He wrote that "It could have been a worthwhile endeavor if a more positive approach had been taken—one which accentuated brotherhood between all Christians" (Madeira, 1976, p. 2). Instead, the attempts to

familiarize the student body with black culture resulted in a larger gap between white and black students. In conclusion, Madeira explained his stance by claiming “If there are cultural differences of such magnitude that an entire week is required to deal with them, more should be done to discard the problem” (Madeira, 1976, p. 2). To develop his point, Madeira called for actions such as admission of non-blacks into the Black Cultural Society, the addition of courses and curriculum about black history and culture, and the university’s hiring policies (Madeira, 1976, p. 2).

By studying Black History Week at Taylor University in 1976 along with both its positives and its negatives, one can better understand subsequent celebrations of this week at Taylor. In 1977, student William H. Chesley wrote in *The Echo* about the week’s theme of “Past, Present, Future.” Intended outcomes of the week included enlightening Taylor students to the black man’s experience throughout history (Chesley, 1977, p. 5). Chesley further described the upcoming events as “an education and experience needed by those individuals who have never been ‘really’ exposed to the Black man’s experience” (Chesley, 1977, p. 5). Once again, the 1977 celebration of Black History Week involved chapel speakers; one a ministry-minded Jamaican, another a local reverend, and two Taylor students.

This newspaper announcement of the 1977 Black History Week proceedings at Taylor also included student opinions concerning the program. Many students expressed their support and hope for the benefits of the celebration. Several students cited the need to remember equality and unity, to learn more about history and experience, and to learn about Black Heritage (“Why?”, 1977, p. 5). On the other hand, a student named Willie Montgomery offered an interesting view by stating that he did not understand the need to devote such time and space to celebrating Black History Week on campus. He expressed his frustration with American culture

and thought he “should not have to go out and promote Black History Week” (Montgomery, 1977, p. 5). Montgomery drew attention to the fact that everyone automatically knows about the 4th of July and readily celebrates it in America. Thus, his main argument held that “We should not have to always tell White America about our day when we know hers” (Montgomery, 1977, p. 5). These articles in *The Echo* set the stage for Black History Week at Taylor University in 1977.

In an addition of *The Echo* published on March 4th, 1977, the reoccurring column titled “As we see it” reflected varying opinions surrounding Taylor’s Black History Week celebration just a week prior. Guest Editorialist Bill Wallace III recounted reactions to a chapel speaker as controversial, startling, offensive, and touching. Wallace summarized the week and a black student-led chapel as a criticism of Taylor students and their prejudice and racism (Wallace, 1977, p. 3). Further, Wallace noted that the reaction to this frustration resulted in a call for correction and reconciliation:

So they have appealed to us, through Black History Week, to hear about their culture differences and accept it. Rather than trying to see them as black-skinned white people, and trying to fit our culture into them, we must see them as black people with a different culture, not better or worse than ours, but different from ours...let’s listen when they tell us of their culture. Let’s learn what they are really like inside. Let’s accept them as they are, not as they should be according to our culture (Wallace, 1977, p. 3).

While Black History Week at Taylor in 1977 elicited some negative reactions from students according to Wallace, he also argued that it brought positive shifts in students’ mindsets (Wallace, 1977, p. 3). Building upon the previous year, Taylor students started to embrace the

idea of Black History Week. Wallace's article demonstrates this motivation to improve and is supported by subsequent articles.

Immediately following Wallace's piece in *The Echo*, Daniel Wolgemuth wrote about his reaction and newfound motivation upon the completion of Black History Week at Taylor in 1977. He called to mind the challenges the week presented as well as the lessons and opportunity for greater awareness (Wolgemuth, 1977, p. 3). Wolgemuth stated a seemingly wide-spread perspective when he wrote "We are all such a variegated breed here at T.U. but through the love and power of Jesus Christ we are tied together" (Wolgemuth, 1977, p. 3). Ending on a motivational note, Wolgemuth wrote to the study body encouraging them to take action instead of falling back into old ways. Evidently, the events of Black History Week positively impacted Wolgemuth. He wrote of his hope that other Taylor students would not rest in their security, but accept the challenge to love all (Wolgemuth, 1977, p. 3).

In contrast, some students offered opposing views of Black History Week in 1977. Robert Mitchell noted in his piece in *The Echo* the downfalls he perceived in the week's events. He called to attention several paradoxes: accepting the black man as equal while Black History Week presented his differences, accepting the black man and being accused of 'white-washing' history, and being told compliments are seen as segregation and mocking (Mitchell, 1977, pp. 3-4). While Mitchell supported Black History Week overall, he seemed to find frustration in its sensitivity and challenge. In the end, Mitchell expressed his motivation to build relationships with individuals so that he could then love, accept, and understand them (Mitchell, 1977, pp. 3-4). To go further, another student offered a contrasting and international perspective.

On March 11th, 1977, an article titled "As I see it" told of an international student's perspective on Black History Week at Taylor University. Charles Masalkulangwa was from

Africa and surprisingly, his argument resembled Mitchell's argument more than Wallace's. He gave a brief history of his experience with the Black Cultural Society at Taylor University and described it as unwelcoming and unsatisfying. Interestingly, he proposed a cultural distinction to replace the differences between Black and White. Instead, Masalkulangwa offered that only African and American cultures exist. To take his point further, Masalkulangwa wrote "If the Black Culture Society claims to include African culture, I am very much disappointed as there is nothing that has been shown concerning the culture of the black man here at Taylor" (Masalkulangwa, 1977, pp. 3, 9). Throughout the rest of his article, Masalkulangwa discussed the pride he had in his African heritage and brought the issue of discrimination to the surface. He called his fellow students to face the real issue and to make the world a better place (Masalkulangwa, 1977, pp. 3, 9). Masalkulangwa closed his article with the request, "Please, I would ask each of us to be part of the solution to the problems which we face" (Masalkulangwa, 1977, pp. 3, 9).

Black History Week in 1977 elicited a varying set of student responses as reported in *The Echo*. This range of perspectives stretched to include strong support for the celebration as well as conviction to work harder in attaining unity. However, the week also had its critics. Some students reported feeling confused, frustrated, and disappointed. According to the available student documentation, mixed messages seemed to spread through the student body. Wading through these challenging issues resulted in varying responses from students. No matter the agreement or disagreement offered in *The Echo's* student articles, the majority of students nevertheless wrote of their commitment to work toward a solution, admitting that something had to change.

Analyzing Taylor University's celebration of Black History Week in 1976 and 1977 gives a snapshot view into the climate of the day. Since the founding of the Black Cultural Society, the week of focusing on racial differences was met with varying levels of support. Comparing the two years shows that more students voiced their opinion in *The Echo* during 1977 than in 1976. This increase in involvement suggests that change started to take place for the better. More students wrestled with the challenges of racial reconciliation and recognition on Taylor's campus. While many of them wrote about their commitment to fixing the problem, there were still some students who had a harder time recognizing the issues. Despite the disagreement, the Black Cultural Society remained committed to Black History Week. Eventually in 1979, the club even gained an advisor, Walt Campbell.

Today, Taylor University still supports the ideals established by the Black Cultural Society. The Multicultural Philosophy Statement, Office of International Programs, ASIA, and several other clubs actively work to promote cultural diversity on campus. The Black Cultural Society once again changed its name and is known today as the Black Student Union. Still, the group's positive influence and goals have not changed. The Black Student Union challenges students and fosters depth of thought in the campus community. Just in 2020 alone, peaceful protests and unity marches have occurred on campus in response to the hurt and blindness that America has seen recently and in history. What began in 1974 continues to this day; the footprints of the Black Cultural Society are still visible on Taylor University's campus today.

In conclusion, the mid-1970s proved to be a rich and preparatory time at Taylor University. The founding of the Black Cultural Society set the stage for a decades-long conversation among Taylor students, faculty, and staff. Under the leadership of President Baptista, the Black Cultural Society members worked diligently to respond to the Civil Right Act

of 1964 and to challenge their peers on campus. Through their constitutional goal and celebration of Black History Week, the group succeeded in starting and deepening conversations of race, equality, and unity across the body of Christ believers. While these efforts were met with both support and opposition, Taylor students overall used the opportunity to express their motivation to love and learn about one another. *The Echo* displayed numerous student opinion pieces that painted a clear picture of the campus climate around this era. In the end, Taylor University's Black Cultural Society lit the flame for a conversation that continues to this day. As members of the Taylor community seek to engage with other believers, remembering this time in history will motivate students to love others despite many differences.

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