

THE CRISIS IN THE NATION

By

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Text: Luke 4:18--"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives (and) to set at liberty those who are oppressed."

You hear the word "crisis" used more and more to describe the state of affairs existing in our nation today. When you look it up in the dictionary you find the first word given as a definition is "decision": a crisis is a time of decision, a turning point. One illustration given is the use of the term in medicine: a crisis is a turning point for better or worse in an acute fever. A national crisis is an unstable state of affairs in which things could get better or worse.

In our topic this morning it is used in the sense of the unstable state of affairs in our caused by racial developments. And when you define a crisis as a turning point for better or worse you see that it carries two elements. One is danger and one is opportunity and that is the pattern our thought will follow.

I

First, then, a time of crisis is a time of danger. Personally, I have been slow to take in the fact. The first warning I heard came as far back as 1963.

During the late spring and early summer of that year we were in Europe and the Middle East. The newspapers abroad made front page news of the

the demonstrations in Birmingham, carrying pictures of the police dogs. One morning we were transferring from the Jordan side of Jerusalem to the Israeli side at the Mandlebaum gate. While I was handling the matter of passports at the desk, Mrs. Redhead sat next an American woman and asked where she was from. When she replied that she was from Birmingham my wife expressed sympathy. Then the lady said, "Where are you from?" and when the answer Greensboro was given, her companion asked her if she had seen the morning paper. We had not, and when we could find a paper we discovered that our own city had been the scene of marches and mass arrests. On returning home, friends who were close to the mind of the negro told me we were in for trouble. I must confess I was not greatly disturbed. It had been one hundred years since we had had trouble and I supposed we had outgrown that sort of thing and could count on business as usual.

Subsequent ^{events} have proved my judgment to be wrong. Here in our own city, two months ago, we witnessed pitched battles between snipers and officers of the law and the wounding of two policemen. Our own city of Greensboro was placed under curfew for several nights--something you and I never dreamed would happen.

In recent months the leaders of our denomination have sensed the situation and have taken steps to insure that church might get the picture. Our Board of Education prepared a set of materials called "The Crisis in the Nation" and have recommended that these materials replace the normal curriculum as the basis of study in adult classes. The sense of urgency is seen further in the fact that the Presbyterian Series on the Protestant Hour, already taped for broadcast, was cancelled, and special messages by qualified individuals were substituted in their place.

The General Assembly of the northern Presbyterian Church, including more than 3 million members, met recently in Minneapolis. One of its ministers,

speaking to his congregation in Pelham, New York, described it as "The Crisis Assembly." He reported that a responsible leader of the negroes came to Minneapolis and called on those northern Presbyterians to provide ten million dollars for investment in housing in low and middle income areas. Reported this minister: "Not belligerently but sadly, he warned that such an appeal is 'very possibly the last attempt anybody is going to make to collect peacefully' this bill for neglect that is long overdue." "There was no doubt," said this white minister, "about the man's commitment to non-violence. But neither was there any doubt that the moment of crisis is here."

What is new in the present situation is the leadership of the black cause. "There was a time when the negro would not assert himself, relying upon certain sympathetic white people to intercede in his behalf. That time is past." Those last two sentences come from a report approved by our own General Assembly, and when I read that I realized how true it is. Having grown up in Mississippi and knowing something of the intimidation of black people, I remember my amazement upon reading that in McComb and in Granada and in Jackson they were standing up for their rights: So, says our General Assembly, "The leadership for racial justice has been taken over by the Negroes who refuse to wait for small gratuities from the white man."

And it will not do to explain the black man's efforts for racial justice by calling them communist-inspired. They stem rather from the teachings of the Old Testament prophets and Jesus of Nazareth. You cannot have missed the fact that most of their meetings have been held in churches, that in Birmingham and Montgomery most of their leaders are ministers; and their aims are supported by all official religious bodies in the country.

One recent writer points out the four stages in social change: persuasion, litigation, demonstration, revolution. In this issue of race the apostle of persuasion was Booker T. Washington, whose message was, "Come, let us reason together." When that plea went unheeded Thurgood Marshall went to the courts. But the courts of Alabama outlawed the NAACP, whose method was litigation, and only then was the SCLC formed to sponsor demonstration. Finally, when the apostle of non-violent demonstration was struck down, that opened the door to revolution and made a hero out of Stokely Carmichael.

This brings us to the crisis in the nation and underscores the element of danger in every crisis. The facts and the figures tell the story of the spreading danger: in 1965 it was Harlem and Watts. In 1966 there were twenty-four other cities added to the list, and last summer the centers of violence increased to sixty-seven. Robert Browning's song about "All's right with the world" seems to have become, "All's riot with the world."

II

Yet along with danger there is the element of opportunity in every crisis. A crisis is a turning point when things can get better or worse. If they get worse the danger increases. But they need not get worse: they can get better, and therein lies opportunity.

The opportunity which is now ours lies in two areas, and the first is attitude. The black man is calling upon the white man to change his attitude. In 1965 a Presbyterian minister was sent to the Watts ghetto in California. He came directly to Montreat and reported that the purpose of the black man's revolt was to call attention to the fact that he was there, that he existed. It made me think of that commercial on TV called "the invisible man." I remember that placard carried on the back of a black man in one of innumerable marches which have been pictured on TV and all it said was, "I am a man." In

that some of my ideas were different. The church employed a black man to come once a week to help with the house-cleaning at the manse. He was a fine man, a graduate student at A & T, working on a master's degree, and Mother got to know him. One day she said to me: "I begin to understand something of what you mean. You know, she said, "we never see this kind of negro at home."

You may have noticed a black man in his sixties who attended our services regularly in the fall. Most of you probably never knew anything about him and I'd like to tell you. He did me the courtesy of calling on me before he left the country. He was Dr. S. M. Broderick, a Ph.D from Harvard, a Full-bright exchange professor teaching at A. & T. and formerly Minister of Education for his country of Sierra Leone in Africa. I think so often of that definition of prejudice as being "down on what you are not up on." An honest recognition of the real worth of many of our black friends would go a long way toward a changed attitude.

A second opportunity afforded by this crisis lies in the area of action. The General Assembly of our church ten days ago adopted this statement: "The Christian response to the Negro riots must be justice--full and undiluted-- as well as the proper demand for law and order. Justice is impossible amid anarchy and chaos. But law and order are impossible without justice."

Some of the meanings of justice are spelled out for us in the Report of the President's Commission on Civil Disorders. It is a large book, and if you do not have time to read it you will find a splendid 22-page summary by the New York Times in the packet of materials on the "Crisis in the Nation" being studied in six of our adult classes and available through the office of the department of Education in our church. One of the encouraging signs of the times

is the social conscience of the present generation of business men. A meeting was held for business leaders of Greensboro recently. I was not there but I saw a report of the meeting on TV and I heard one of our leaders of industry say this: "We must find jobs for the hard-core unemployed of our city." On the initiative of the elders of this church the Presbyterians of Greensboro are developing plans for a year-round day care center for negro children of working mothers.

The General Assembly in its recent meeting took two definite actions regarding the crisis in the nation; one negative, the other positive. It voted down, 220-200, a resolution to endorse the aims of the Poor People's March in Washington; but it approved a motion to urge all members of the Presbyterian Church in the United States to work for equal opportunity in housing in their communities."

A friend sent me a list of actions which can now be taken by the white community which can turn danger into opportunity. The list is two pages of single-spaced typing, and too long to be quoted here. A suggestion given by a negro leader and quoted here on April 7th, is the provision of capital for low-cost private housing; and I am happy to report that the suggestion is already being turned into action. Following the meeting of the Session which approved the participation of this church in the Day Care project, one of the elders expressed his satisfaction we were now doing something more than simply talking about the crisis.

III

Move on now to consider the obligation of the member when his church makes declarations in the area of proposed action. I am indebted to one of our members who wrote me a letter and brought the matter to my attention. He was disturbed by certain pronouncements of the church courts on matters like open housing, and the

latest issue of the Presbyterian Survey, with its proposed program of action, brought his mind to a boil. "I believe," he said, "the ruling bodies of our own First Presbyterian Church should make their stand known to the congregation." It is a reasonable request, and it is good to know that he is taking seriously what the church is saying.

I should like this gentlemen and others to know that the church member is not the only one who needs guidance: many among the older ministers are in the same boat. A contemporary of mine in the ministry said to me a year ago: "The church has gone far out in front of you and me." So it has. When the General Assembly said in 1963 that: "Enforced segregation is discrimination which is out of harmony with Christian theology and ethics," I could agree. But when it went on to say that "the church in its relationship to cultural matters should lead and not follow" I found that more difficult. I found it difficult because it represents a reversal of the teaching regarding the mission of the church in which I had been trained. Upon investigation I discovered that the church has officially changed its position to include in its mission not only the individual and the family but society as well; and while intellectually I can go along with the change, I find it still difficult emotionally.

In searching for ground to stand on I think I have found it in an action of the General Assembly of 1963. In its report on The Relationship Between the Races it stated its position on matters like housing and jobs and voting and public accommodations, and then it approved this recommendation: "That both the clergy and the laity be reminded that this report is not mandatory but pastoral and prophetic in character; it shall be studied in local churches; thereby opening minds to the prompting of God's Spirit, who is able to unite in Christ people of every temperament and every persuasion."

In response to the request for a policy statement from the ruling body of this church I presented this action of the General Assembly to the Session on June 9th and it was approved. The author of the letter said: "I do not believe the present generation is ready to be forced into revolutionary racial changes, but is mature enough to encourage evolutionary progress in that direction." As I understand it, this action of the General Assembly is in accord with the belief expressed. It says that its positions are not mandatory but prophetic: that is, statements of what the church believes to be the mind of God, and are to be studied, thereby opening minds to the promptings of God's Spirit. Such a process I take to be evolutionary.

The whole point of our discussion is the question of authority: the authority of the church with its members. The Book of Church Order makes two statements which are of interest. It says that "Church courts have jurisdiction only for the purpose of serving Christ and declaring his will." It says further: "A church court can make no laws to bind the conscience, since Christ alone is Lord of the conscience and the Scriptures are the only rule of faith and morals."

You will see that there are three factors here: the individual conscience, the Bible, and the Church. What is the conscience? The conscience is the voice of God which tells a man he must do what is right, but by itself it never tells him what is right. Conscience needs something to be guided by, and that something is provided here in the Bible and the church. Ultimate authority for the Christian always resides in the Bible, as understood by the individual conscience, and as corrected by the collective conscience which is the church.

We live in a time of change: there is no doubt about that. As we seek to adjust to it, I think Jesus is saying to us what he said to his men just before his departure: "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them

bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you in all truth." The church is saying to us now many things which we find it difficult to bear. Individual conscience, as it understands the Bible, may consider some of these things out of line. Yet you and I have the obligation to check our conscience by the collective Christian conscience of the church which serves Christ by declaring his will. And we have the promise of our Lord that his Spirit will guide us into all truth.

The text for this morning comes at the end of the sermon instead of at the beginning. One day Jesus was in church in Nazareth and the presiding officer invited him to read the lesson. He took the papyrus roll of the prophecy of Isaiah and turned to the ninth verse of the ninth chapter and began to read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, (and) to set at liberty those who are oppressed." Then he closed the book and gave it back to the attendant, and said to the congregation: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It was as much as to say: "Here is what I came to do and herein are the marching orders of those who follow me." In whatever ways you can help to give good news to the poor and release to the captives and liberty to those who are oppressed, you have the opportunity to make this crisis in the nation a turning point for the better.