



First Presbyterian Church

Greensboro, N. C.

"YOUR CHURCH AND RACIAL BROTHERHOOD"

By

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February 12, 1956

Acts 11:9—*"But the voice answered a second time from heaven, "What God has cleansed you must not call common."*

The sermon this morning comes from a suggestion by one of our members. He remarked that the race question is something everybody is interested in, and that our denomination in the last several years has taken certain significant actions. He thought it would be helpful in guiding the thinking of our people if they could be informed concerning these actions. That sounded sensible to me, and so on Brotherhood Sunday our topic has to do with Your Church and Racial Brotherhood.

I

The story goes back to a meeting of the General Assembly of 1953. Of course the Church has been conscious of the race question for several decades, but that year this body, the Supreme Court of the denomination, received a recommendation from a minister relative to segregation in church-controlled institutions. Its handling of this recommendation was most wise. It was placed in the hands of the Council on Christian Relations, which was directed to make a study of it and report the following year. The Council is composed of 14 men and women, who are lawyers and ministers and theological professors and businessmen.

That Council made its report to the meeting of the General Assembly at Montreat in 1954 under three headings: The Bible and Human Relationships, Racial Integration, and The Position of the Church. When action is to be taken on any report the meat in the coconut is in the recommendations, and those which interest you most are these:

1. That the General Assembly affirm that enforced segregation of the races is discrimination which is out of harmony with Christian theology and ethics and that the Church, in its relationship with cultural patterns, should lead rather than follow.
2. That the sessions of local churches (be urged) to admit persons to membership and fellowship in the local church on the Scriptural basis of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ without reference to race.
3. That in this time of crisis and concern, we commend to all individuals in our Communion and especially to all leaders of our churches the earnest cultivation and practice of the Christian graces of forbearance, patience, humility and persistent good will.

As soon as the motion to adopt was made the debate began. Sentiment in the body seemed to be rather evenly divided, and many speeches pro and con were made. The best of them all, and the one which seemed to determine the final vote was made by Dr. Donald Miller of Richmond, who has visited our church twice within the year. He pointed out that beginning with the creation there was an essential unity of mankind set forth in Scripture, that such unity was broken by man's sin at the Tower of Babel; and that the church in both Testaments exists to bear witness to the restored unity of mankind in a society which knows nothing about it. In the Bible and in the Confession of Faith, he said, the only division between men which can be found is between saint and sinner, between believer and unbeliever. His speech took the question out of the stream of tradition and set it against the background of Biblical truth, and when the vote was taken the report was approved by a vote of 236 to 159.

Such a division in the vote indicated the divided opinion in the Church, and it was inevitable that there should be later attempts to rescind. When the Synod of North Carolina met two months later four local churches offered resolutions calling upon the Synod to repudiate the action of the Assembly. When the next General Assembly met 12 months later it received from the Synod of Mississippi an overture calling upon that court to rescind its previous action. Both the Synod of North Carolina and the General Assembly voted down the request to repudiate or to rescind.

While there still exists a strong division of sentiment, it is clear that the majority opinion in your church believes that enforced segregation of the races is discrimination and is out of harmony with Christian teaching, and that sessions of local churches should admit members on the basis of faith regardless of race.

II

Along with the report whose recommendations we have been discussing, the Council on Christian Relations presented another paper which I found helpful and, I believe, will prove interesting to you. It was called "A Statement to Southern Christians," and was received by the Assembly and recommended for study.

This paper came face to face with the practical problems which will arise in the change from a segregated to a non-segregated society. It begins with the fear that with the disappearance of segregation Southern white people will be forced against their will to accept as social companions persons whose fellowship at this level they do not desire. What it has to say on this point will calm the apprehension in many minds.

"This fear," says the paper, "should be examined with care. For if the setting aside of this system actually made such results inevitable, the very prospect of the change might well give us pause. The wish to be free to pick one's friends and associates socially is normal and understandable. No person of feeling wants to be compelled to do otherwise. Any social arrangement which violates the individual's rights to personal privacy would be unjust and offensive, and any state that tried to bring it about would expose itself to the charge of tyranny."

The Statement goes ahead to analyze the situation as we have it socially at present within the white group alone. "Within this group, under a policy of free association uncontrolled by law, no individual is compelled to extend social privileges to anybody else regardless of his personal desire and preferences. His home he need not open to anyone he wishes to bar from his door What we have within the white group now is what might be called a pattern of voluntary intermingling on the basis of personal tastes and common interests As our present racial system gives way to a different order, it therefore seems reasonable to believe that what has always been possible among white people will also be the prevailing pattern among whites and Negroes." It points out that what is being requested by our colored friends is "abolition of public segregation" and then makes this comment: "As public segregation disappears we may safely assume that as long as the attitude of white Southerners remains what it is, Negroes will not wish to associate with them."

The Statement then comes to grips with the basic problem which is always in the back of the minds of members of the white group, namely, the fear that doing away with segregation will lead to widespread intermarriage. The comment which it makes is both reasonable and sound:

"There are countless white families in the South whose sons most white parents do not wish their daughters to marry. But these parents do not, for that reason, demand that these white families be forcibly segregated or in any way restricted in the use of or enjoyment of any public services provided by the community. They rely on something else entirely. They depend rather on the kind of teaching and example they provide in the home to instill into their daughters the sort of knowledge and preferences that will guide them aright in the selection of a marriage partner. This method most of us recognize as soundly democratic and Christian, and it is also the only method which, on the score of practical effectiveness, can be trusted as psychologically sound. For this reason it may also be accepted and trusted when our Negro people are given the same legal rights and educational opportunities which the white group now enjoys."

If you wish to put it in a nutshell, what your Church has to say about racial brotherhood is this: enforced segregation is out of harmony with Christian teaching and membership in Presbyterian churches ought to be open to anyone regardless of race; but such a position does not necessitate social intermingling and it regards intermarriage as unwise.

III

As you listen to what your church has to say in favor of an unsegregated society, you are conscious of a dilemma. If you grew up in the South, such thinking is different from anything some of you have ever known. How does it happen that the Church has gone so far off the track, and what will be your attitude toward its teaching?

I think the answer to the first part of your question comes from a story in the Book of Acts. It has to do with an Italian officer of the Roman army stationed in Palestine, and Simon Peter. Cornelius was a devout man and God spoke to him through an angel in a vision, instructing him to send to Joppa and bring Peter. While the messengers were on the way, Peter had a strange vision. He was hungry and as he waited for his hostess to fix lunch he saw a sheet let down from heaven by its four corners. In it were all sorts of animals and birds and Peter was instructed to prepare them for eating. He protested that he had a conscience about such matters and for religious reasons did not eat anything unclean. Then he was told by the voice, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." While Peter was wondering what that meant, the men sent by Cornelius knocked on his door and told him why they had come, and the inner voice told him to go with them.

Next day he reached Joppa and found that a large group had accepted Cornelius' invitation to his home. When Peter walked in and saw these people he was invited to tell them what God had commanded him to say. He began by reminding them of the segregation between Jews and Gentiles. "You yourselves know," he said, "how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean . . . Truly I perceive that God is no respecter of persons—that He shows no partiality—, but in every nation any one who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him." He went on to describe the coming of Jesus and the preaching of the gospel and, as he spoke, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard. Peter's Jewish friends could not believe their eyes. What the Bible says is this: "And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." When Peter saw that God had given His approval to these people in the coming of the Spirit, he decided that he had no right to refuse to baptize them, and so he proceeded to their baptism.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem he was criticized by some of the people for what he had done, just as commissioners to the General Assembly were criticized after the action which we have described. This is what the Bible says: "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go with the uncircumcision men and eat with them?'" It is the same sort of thing which has been said to members of the General Assembly: "Why did you vote to eliminate these racial customs which we have known so long?" By way of answer, Peter went on to tell about the vision of the sheet containing things to eat and of the command, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." And then he closed by saying this: "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?"

Now what does that story have to say to us? It seems to me that it speaks directly to the problem which some of you face. The question in the minds of some of us is this: what is going to be my attitude toward the church when it takes a position which runs counter to my way of thinking? It is in its essence the conflict between tradition and ultimate truth.

Peter belonged to a tradition which segregated Jews from Gentiles. Moreover, that separation was enforced by religious teaching. We belong to a tradition in the South which has segregated the races. We have thought that we had Biblical backing for our tradition and we have been taught to do all we can for our Negro friend as long as he stayed in his place.

But when Peter came face to face with God his tradition was upset by truth and he had the courage to change his way of thinking. He had been willing to do all he could for Gentiles as long as they stayed in their place. But he had come to see that God is no respecter of persons, by reason of race or color, and what he said to his critics was this: "Who was I to withstand God?"

That is exactly what happened in the General Assembly. When the leaders of your Church submitted their tradition to the truth of God as revealed in the Bible, they found that God is no respecter of persons; that at the foot of the cross the ground is level; that what God has cleansed we dare not call common. They then said what Peter said: "Who are we to withstand God?" And like Peter they had the courage to upset tradition in favor of truth and to say: "Enforced segregation is out of harmony with Christian teaching."

Here is a minister who sent a number of books including a New Testament to a book binder to be rebound. He was surprised on the return of the books to find on the shelfback of the New Testament a label in guilt letters, "T. N. T." There was no room to spell out "The New Testament," so the bookbinder inscribed merely the first letters of the three words, "T. N. T."

Ever since it was written the New Testament has been TNT. It exploded in the face of the divine right of kings four hundred years ago and gave us our political freedom. It exploded in the face of a dictatorial Church four hundred years ago and gave us our spiritual freedom. It exploded in the face of intellectual snobbery about the same time and gave us our freedom of the mind and our public schools. And now it has exploded in the face of our claim of racial superiority. It is poor sportsmanship to accept and enjoy freedoms which it has brought to us, and to deny the same freedom to others who live in bondage. We might as well get used to the fact that God is no respecter of persons; because that is God's truth, and who are we to withstand him? Our forefathers in the South learned to live with the abolition of slavery one hundred years ago, and we will have to learn to live with the abolition of enforced segregation in our present world.

Of course whenever a load of T. N. T. goes off, some things get shaken up. Apparently it cannot be helped. That is civilization's growing pains. And so it seems to me the final action in the Assembly's report is one to which we might well give heed.

It goes like this: "That in this time of crisis and concern, we commend to all individuals in our communion and especially to all leaders of our churches the earnest cultivation and practice of the Christian graces of forbearance, patience, humility, and persistent good will."

The sermons of Dr. John A. Redhead are printed through the courtesy of Mr. W. J. Carter, a member of our church, and under the auspices of the Couples' Forum Publication Committee. There is no charge for copies of these sermons but in making request for your copies, it would be appreciated if you would send sufficient postage for mailing. Send requests to:

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