

## "THE CHRISTIAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS"

INTRODUCTION On Wednesday, the 28th day of August, 200,000 people marched into the City of Washington. Most of them were Negroes, many of them were not. It was a demonstration for equal rights. The amazing thing about it was that there was no disorder, no violence. On the following Friday, James Reston, writing in the New York Times, wrote about the March in his column. He is one of the interpreters of events to whom I turn most confidently.

I have here a copy of his article. The first sentence of his article struck me like a blow. He said: "The first significant test of the Negro March on Washington will come in the churches and the synagogues of the country this weekend." His implication was that if nothing happened in the churches nothing would happen in Congress. Let me read two or three other sentences of his article.

As I read what he had to say, my mind turned to this church. What has happened in this church since then. Very little. Up to this point, nothing has been said about the March from the pulpit. We have had a first hand report of the March brought to the Official Board of the Church by three of our own people who participated in the March. I thought, too, about the Methodist Church at large. Has anything happened, or is anything significant going to happen in the Church at large. There are encouraging signs that we as a Church are beginning to go beyond talk and resolutions to more active involvement in this racial revolution. The Human Rights Rally that will be held this afternoon is a step in that direction. Things are happening in our churches across the land. More and more people are becoming involved. Sometimes I wonder whether James Reston fully appreciates how much has been happening in the churches. Granted, the church has not done all that it can do and should do, but our churches have done infinitely more than that particular article of his would lead an outsider to guess.

I am not sure that preaching in and by itself will change anybody's mind, but Reston's article has lain heavily on my own conscience for four weeks, and for better or worse I am going to remind once again of how I feel and what I think the Christian's approach to this great issue should be.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS Where do we begin. Suppose we begin with the Bible. Upon doing so, we would discover, first of all that there are no specific directions about this particular matter in the Bible, none whatever. Slavery is taken for granted in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Words like integration, segregation, desegregation, inter-racial do not appear anywhere in the Bible, for the situation to which they refer did not exist then as it does now. The first thing then that I want to make clear is this: you can neither defend or oppose the idea that the colored and white are separate on the basis of some particular passage in the Bible. Many people have tried to do it. Some have tried to defend the idea that the colored and white are separate, and some have tried to oppose it on the basis of a fragment or a scrap or a line taken out of its Biblical context. You cannot

do it. The Bible was too early for the particular social revolution which is sweeping across our land.

However, there is something much more powerful in the Bible than specific direction. There is in the Bible a movement toward the emancipation of men and women. That is the important thing about the Bible. From the first page to the last page, the Bible is the story of a movement toward the freedom of a man to be himself and to live his own life within the limits of his human condition.

This movement began at the Red Sea when one small tribe broke loose from bondage to another people. It was the beginning of the movement. It ends supremely on Calvary when Jesus, one single human being in whom the fullness of God revealed itself, was free to be himself and as a consequence frees other people to be themselves. It is liberty born out of sacrifice. It is the only real liberty there is.

During his brief ministry Jesus never spoke about Negroes or said anything that has anything to do with the problem that we are now dealing with. For one thing, there weren't many Negroes in his neighborhood. There were, however, a great many Samaritans and the Samaritans were as thoroughly segregated from the Jews as Negroes are from the whites. Segregation was a habit peculiarly congenial to the Jewish people. Yet, as far as we know, Jesus never talked about integration or segregation in principle or in theory. One time he told an unforgettable story about a certain Samaritan who helped a Jew who was in a bad way - the last person in the world you would expect to stop to help a Jew. And when ten lepers ran to him for help, he healed them all, but only one went back to thank him, "and he was a Samaritan".

In his own behavior Jesus treated people like human beings, no matter who they were - whether they came from the aristocracy or from the gutter, from the Park Avenue of Jerusalem or from the Bowery, no matter what they had done, whether they had a magnificent record or whether they had only the record of failure. He treated people - all people - as human beings regardless of their background, their social position, their income, and their color. This was the example of Jesus, the example that we as sincere church men must follow. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. The essential thing is that in his dealings with people he brought them into the presence of God, the same God from whom they all originally come, from whom they all derived their lives, in the sight of whom they all failed, and by whose tender, understanding love they could all be made new. He brought them all into the presence of that God and the equality they had was the equality that he gave them as he drew them into the presence of God,

There on Calvary stands Jesus. The years go by, the generations pass, the fashions of thought change, but Jesus remains on Calvary - the center of human dignity and integrity, where the cross purposes of life are accepted and saved from desperate remedies.

Gradually, people begin to see what it means to be associated with Him. To be sure, they may not see it all at once. Even Paul, the Great Apostle, didn't see it completely. He saw the great thing, but he didn't have time in his own lifetime to work out all of the implications, all of the details. But gradually people see that to be associated with Jesus means to treat other human beings the way he would treat them. It's quite a thing to see. If you see it once, you won't always be able to do it but this in no way relieves you of the necessity of trying. And if you see it once, it will get into your life and you will never be the same again.

Copernicus declared that the earth went around the sun and he proved it to his own satisfaction. It took a hundred years for the plain people of the western world to take in that idea, and they are still working out the implications of it. Jesus declared that every human being revolved around God. It took a long time for people to take in that idea, too; they were so used to thinking that God revolved around them. He began a movement toward freedom, and it has taken us a long time (twenty centuries) to see that this movement toward freedom includes all peoples....all!

A NEW FRONT We come then to this present time. This movement has now reached a new front. In this country Negroes have never been treated like human beings, by and large. I know that that is a general statement, and it may be that some of you will not agree with it. I stand by that statement, however, that Negroes in this country have never been treated before the law as human beings. Many of them have been dearly loved and treated with great kindness the way you might treat a child, but when they wanted to vote, they were treated in another fashion.

In the last few years two things have happened. The first is that the Negroes in this country now demand to be treated as human beings. ~~Some of you may secretly wish that they didn't, but they~~ have the numbers and the intelligence to demand it, and they will continue to demand it until they get it. They have waited for one hundred years and they might well say to us, "We have waited long enough". The longer they wait, the more insistent their demands will become.

The other thing that has happened is that some white people, many white people sincerely want this. They are people who have been caught up with this movement started by Jesus. Nominally they may not be Christian, but they are part of this movement toward freedom and I am proud to claim my association with them as most of you are. I think the Christians who want this see the difficulties involved in all of this. The problems are many. The whole social pattern of the country is changing; for many it is like an earthquake. The Christians who want this see the difficulties, but they cannot deny the principle and they are compelled under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to continue to move bravely toward it.

The Christian begins by saying: you give them equal social rights because it is right. And then you deal with the problems that arise, all of the undesirable consequences that result, one by one in patience and with intelligence. I think that this is essentially

what the American people said in another situation fifty years ago. I refer to the labor movement. You gave labor the right to organize because it was right; if there are undesirable consequences, and there certainly have been, you handle those as well as you can as they arise.

We are now standing on the new front and as we stand there we can see real gains in every direction. As we look toward the South, we see real gains in many southern cities and towns, gains that have been made quietly, white and Negro people working together, both realizing how difficult it is - with patience, intelligence and loving kindness. My brother in law (this is my wife's sister's husband) is an Episcopal minister in a North Carolina community and this summer he took into the membership of his parish, a Negro couple...the first Negroes who have belonged to that church. Unfortunately, these events never make the headlines. Right here in our own city, the gains are being made. The discrimination in NYC is far more subtle, more private, more difficult to pin down. But progress is being made.

The Methodist Church in this Area, in this conference, is integrated, integrated in such a way as no other conference throughout Methodism is integrated. We have more Negro Methodists in Manhattan than we have white Methodists. We have certain instances where a Negro pastor is serving or has served a pre-dominantly white congregation and done so with great effectiveness. Looking more closely at our own church, we see that there are Negroes who share in the life of our church. There are some who belong to this church, with all rights and privileges. They have been accepted as members of this church for years. We see that there are white people in this church who are working for this movement, quietly, not necessarily talking about it, but working for it, in order to give to people who crave to be treated as human beings the right to live as human beings in a community which includes both white and colored.

There are some within our church fellowship who may think that this whole movement is in the wrong direction. They think it is contrary to the Bible, and a few who think that it is inspired by Communism. There are some, I'm sure, who are in sympathy with the article that David Lawrence wrote about the March and which he called "The Day of Disgrace". I welcome these people to this congregation. We will never all be of one mind. I do not agree with them. I think they are wrong, but I love them and want them to be here.

Christian people can no longer afford to sit back and do nothing. We cannot pass by on the other side. We cannot remain silent. Christians who support segregation by action or inaction betray Jesus Christ and the fellowship which bears his name. We urge that you write and talk with your representatives in Congress and ask them to support a strong Civil Rights bill.

I am speaking for myself and for those whose consciences are stirring, for those who know that Christians belong to a movement begun originally by God, brought to a head by Christ, and worked

History, I feel, will one day show such voices to have been obsolete in their own time.

out imperfectly by individuals like you and me. I am speaking for all those who see, even though dimly, what Paul was aiming at. ~~He didn't see it himself, but he was aiming at something great the fullness of which he never attained.~~ I am speaking for those who see what he was aiming at when he said:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

LET US PRAY: As we direct our thoughts, O God, to the great issues of our time, help us to think clearly and then lead us out of ourselves toward him who is the purpose of all men, that we may show forth in our lives something of his life....his love....his compassion....his concern for all sorts and conditions of men. Take us in hand when we begin to grow indifferent and make us like Thee, who didst reach out to all men in Christ Jesus. Amen