

MORAL CRISIS IN A TROUBLED SOUTH

At no time in the present century has the South been so deeply troubled in soul as it is today. This anxiety is, of course, partly the result of pressures arising out of a far-reaching decision of the Supreme Court. But its root goes deeper. Unless I am seriously mistaken, it stems from a growing conviction that our legally imposed color bar is in basic conflict with both the democratic ethic and the Christian faith. This conflict is involving us of the South in a deepening moral crisis which I feel constrained to discuss with you today.

In meditating upon our present crisis, my thought has turned often to that dramatic story which was read to you this morning (Acts 9:1-20). In passionate loyalty to his ancestral tradition, Saul of Tarsus earnestly tried to wipe out the early Christians. Where persuasion would not work he did not hesitate to persecute, to imprison, even to murder. Yet at the very height of his frenzied zeal, while hurrying to Damascus, a light from heaven brighter than the sun, flashed through his conscience, and a voice said to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you?" stammered Saul. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," replied the heavenly visitor. "It hurts you to kick against the goads."

Note one thing: the more fiercely Saul persecuted the early Christians, the more brightly the moral flame burned within his conscience, until at last the scales fell from his blinded eyes

and he was transformed into an advocate of that which he had formerly opposed.

Are not we of the South experiencing an inner moral conflict which broadly parallels that of Saul of Tarsus? Is not the light from above disturbing our consciences? Will the heavenly flame eventually burn through our clouded visions and transform our racial perspectives?

I

My considered answer, based finally upon faith in the sovereignty of God, is a strong yes. Our moral road to Damascus may be long and tortuous, but we are on our way. When I say we are on our way, I mean simply that thousands of white Southerners, including especially youth, can no longer morally justify the principle of racial segregation. To be sure, they are still a minority group, yet their numbers are steadily growing. They do not, like some noisy demagogues, shout their views from the house-tops, but their convictions lie deep nevertheless.

One fact is worth emphasizing at the outset. This new spiritual outlook did not start on May 17, 1954, when the Supreme Court first ruled against the Plessy doctrine of separate-but-equal. In fact, ever since the First World War, the South has been the scene of the prophetic labors of such men as the late Will Alexander and Howard Odum, to whom the color bar was anathema. Through the actions of interracial councils and commissions, through researches and publications, they sowed the seeds of a greater South. While they labored patiently within a bi-racial framework, they foresaw the day when it would be abandoned.

Four years before the Supreme Court handed down its historic decision, the Presbyterian Synod of Alabama declared, "Segregation is living on borrowed time." Both the Federal Constitution and the Christian conscience, the Synod added, have written doom upon the brow of legalized segregation. Southern groups in all the other major denominations were expressing similar convictions. Meanwhile church-related colleges, graduate and professional schools of state universities, and theological seminaries were opening their doors to all qualified students.

Hence, when the Supreme Court finally struck down the Plessy doctrine, the leaders of most of the religious bodies in the South were already prepared to sanction its ruling. Episcopalians, in their Southeastern Provincial Conference, called the decision "just and right." A Texas Methodist Conference declared it to be "but the legal assertion of the position of the Christian Church." The General Assembly of Southern Presbyterians commended the Court's ruling and called upon all church members to support it. The Southern Baptist Convention acknowledged the decision to be "in harmony with the constitutional guarantee of equal freedom to all citizens, and with the Christian principles of equal justice and love for all men." Catholic and Jewish agencies in the South were equally affirmative in their actions. These church groups, be it noted, were not so-called "outside meddlers," but native Southerners.

II

For a brief interval after the Supreme Court rendered its verdict it looked as though a good many cities and communities

in the South would take steps to keep faith with the Court. Indeed, local school boards in some of the more progressive cities began taking actions toward compliance.

But, alas, this affirmative spirit soon encountered a different temper. Tough-willed resistance movements began emerging, springing up first of all in the Lower South, led by ardent segregationists whose extremist members openly defied the Supreme Court. They insisted on the freedom of their respective States to do as they pleased, but yet they did not tolerate that same freedom within their own borders. Rigid conformity was demanded, even at the price of coercion if necessary.

This spirit of resistance later spread to the Upper South as well. Although revealing itself in sweeter words, the overall effect was the same. Almost everywhere the prevailing mood has been to prevent any local community from cracking the wall of segregation. This holds not only for public schools, but largely also for many other public facilities such as city halls and recreational centers. Even where the color bar has been outlawed, as in public education, the Negro is exhorted to volunteer to remain segregated. This frozen temper says, "don't give an inch, or you will have to give a mile."

Grave dangers lie ahead of a South in this inflexible mood. First of all, we are in danger of jeopardizing our public schools. The movement to assign to local communities the final decision on questions of vital school policy, hitherto reserved to state boards of education, can easily scuttle the hard-won standards which have been a half-century in building. This backward-looking trend threatens the South with all the evils of the old district school

system. The outcome could be, not a state-wide system, but a patchwork of uneven policies, standards, and programs. Add to this the legal option of any local community to abolish its public schools altogether, and the prospect becomes alarming. Some may call this power to close a local school "a safety valve," but it seems far more like a time bomb. If we in the South ever become so unbalanced as to wipe out our public schools, we will sentence our children to the tyranny of ignorance and poverty.

A second danger is that the South will cut itself off from the main currents of the Nation — industrial, political, cultural. Our twentieth century form of secession could be secession, not from the political household of the Union, as in 1860, but from the main stream of democratic civilization. It is as true of a region as it is of an individual that if it tries to live unto itself, it will shrivel up and die of stagnation.

This decaying process would be hastened by the migration of our abler youth to freer sections of the Nation, as in the wake of the Civil War. Meanwhile, the present flow into our region of industrialists, scientists, skilled technicians, and vocational specialists would slow down to a trickle. This two-way loss of creative leadership would leave the South to the inevitable ravages of political demagogues, cultural drones, and moral bigots.

Yet another danger is that we will so bungle our interracial relations as to cripple America's moral leadership in the larger world community. Remember, two out of every three people in the world are colored, and our behavior is an open book to them. The shameful Lucy spectacle and the barbaric Emmet Till murder were unfolded daily to the Chinese, the Africans, the Indonesians, and

other colored peoples who are coming to power in the greatest revolution of modern history. They measure our morality and our good will, not by our words, but by our deeds. When the Voice of America proclaims to them the virtues of our Declaration of Independence and our Bill of Rights, they read our professed ideals through the lenses of our daily actions.

When the Supreme Court first ruled against segregated public schools, totalitarian governments interpreted it as a fraud palmed upon the world, and they predicted that in any case the South would not abide by it. Shall we in the South fulfil their cynical prophecies? If we do, my brethren, we will give aid and comfort to the mortal enemies of democracy.

III

But that which should give us the deepest concern of all is the tragic fact that we dare to risk all these dangers because of a fundamentally anti-Christian assumption about a group of our fellowmen. After taking a wide-ranging poll of Southern sentiment, Howard Odum declared that the heart of our credo can be summed up in these words: "The Negro is a Negro, and nothing more." In other words, the Negro is humanly inferior to the white man. In the final analysis, our dual racial structure in the South rests upon that belief.

Let us then face squarely our Southern credo in the light of the Christian revelation which came to Saul as he paced the road to Damascus. Without question, he did more than any other follower of Jesus to emancipate the early Church from the bonds of Judaism and transform it into a fellowship of all races. For this very

reason his fellow Jews conspired to kill him.

Nevertheless he "was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." When Peter later wavered in his supraracial views, Paul boldly rebuked him. "Is God the God of the Jews only?" Paul asked the Christians at Rome. "Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one" (Romans 3:29-30).

Note well his decisive words, "since God is one." Paul here laid the very corner stone of Christian community. It is faith, not race, which determines the range of our Christian fellowship. Where there is true faith in one God there is no color bar. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, . . . neither slave nor free; . . . for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Is it not clear, then, why we white churchmen are conscience-stricken? We do not presume to be better than our worthy forefathers, yet we do believe, as most of them apparently did not, that a racially segregated Church is a tragic denial of that community which is inherent in One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism. Since God is one, we are members one of another — equally subject to God's judgment and mercy; equally accountable to Him; equally valuable in His sight. Hence, to discriminate against a single one of His children on the ground of race is to impugn the moral character of God. Human equality is not the gift of man, it is the gift of God; therefore, human equality is an unalienable spiritual attribute of every child of God.

When we consider the Supreme Court's decision from this Christian perspective, we are bound to admit that it is morally right. If therefore this ruling is being bitterly assailed in the South, it is due in no small measure to the moral infirmity of our Christianity. Many of the most rabid enemies of the

Court's ruling are members of our Protestant churches. Let us ministers in particular take this fact seriously to heart, pondering our faith and our stewardship. Had we been fully surrendered to the will of God, it is hard to believe that so many lay pillars in our churches would now be party to an un-Christian movement to obstruct the course of human justice.

How long will be our journey to Damascus? It will be as long as we persist in our un-Christian belief that our colored brother is only a Negro, and nothing more. A fundamental change of heart may require a very long journey, a journey of trial and tribulation. Nevertheless, since the moral flame from heaven is already penetrating our consciences, the Eternal Light will eventually burn away the scales which obscure a larger vision of the Kingdom of God.

Symbolic of that new day is a generally unknown act which was performed by the South's greatest Civil War hero. Within a year after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, an unwanted Negro entered one of Richmond's fashionable churches while Holy Communion was being served, made his way down the aisle, and knelt at the Communion Altar. The congregation sat aghast, and emotions quickened. Sensing the situation, a distinguished layman arose in his pew, stepped forward to the Altar, and knelt beside his colored brother. Captured by his spirit, the congregation followed his magnanimous example.

That layman was Robert E. Lee. On that Sunday morning he won the greatest battle of his career. For "greater is he that mastereth his spirit than he that taketh a city." By the grace of God, Robert E. Lee lighted a spiritual torch that will never go out until we of the South, black and white, are transformed into a fellowship as broad and as enduring as the love of Christ.