

August 1963

I am a preacher of the Gospel. For fifteen years I preached regularly as the pastor of local churches. Now I teach preaching in a theological seminary.

On Sunday, August 4, I preached a sermon in the suburban church with which my family and I are affiliated. For my theme I raised the question: "What Makes a Church Great?" In giving my own answer I declared that the local church which rises above the vast range of mediocrity to attain true greatness must be characterized by four principles: (1) It is truly ecumenical, (2) It graciously receives all of God's children into its worship and fellowship, (3) Its pulpit is free, and (4) It listens actively and seriously to the Word of God. After that service I was rather pleased with myself, feeling that I had said some things that needed very much to be said. In fact, I was inclined to feel that I had said them rather boldly. So I spent the rest of that Sabbath day comforting myself before the cooling breezes of my air-conditioner.

On Wednesday morning, August 7, I was settling down for a day of concentrated study. Then the phone rang and I felt a kick in my conscience from my own sermon. Dr. Dudley Ward, the General Secretary of the General Board of Christian Social Concerns of the Methodist Church, was calling from Washington, D. C. to ask if I would go to Clarksdale, Mississippi, with a group of white clergymen to help the Commission on Race and Religion of the National Council of Churches make a witness for racial brotherhood and justice. Having been a polite and refined integrationist all of my life I immediately recoiled from getting mixed up in the racial mess in Mississippi. But instantly I knew I was trapped by the words which I had spoken so effortlessly, if not courageously, on Sunday. Preaching, it seemed, is getting to be a risky business. Somebody had just thrown a fistful of my own words back into my own teeth! I think it was God.

Twelve hours later I was walking up the steep steps of a Negro Baptist Church in Clarksdale, Mississippi, to attend a civil rights and freedom rally. For the first time in my life I sat in a church which I knew had a good chance of being bombed - with me in it. And I knew that I was in a tight and tense situation where the ugly facts of a police state constituted a haunting reality. As I entered the church I beheld a large group of young people shaking the walls with their rhythmical clapping and chanting: "I want my freedom!" Many of these young people had just been released from jail where they had spent several days for marching in a freedom parade without a permit. In a few moments

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they were to be loudly cheered and acclaimed as the authentic heroes of a new age, and I knew in my heart that there was for me no turning back, no escaping to the concealing shadows of anonymity, no refuge in that safe and secure pulpit where on Sunday I had spoken for freedom, brotherhood and love.

What was this happening in Clarksdale, Mississippi? Clarksdale is a city of about 20,000, well over half of whom are Negro. But Negroes in Clarksdale, as in so many other American cities, do not have equal rights and opportunities. They live under constant humiliation and harassment. They have no representation in the local government nor in the management of the completely segregated schools. The quality of education afforded Negro children is very poor. Not a single Negro child attends an accredited school in the community. Negroes are systematically denied the right to register for voting. An average week will find at least fifty Negroes presenting themselves to register to vote. Generally fewer than five are permitted to register. Many high school graduates have thus been denied. All public facilities are segregated. Negroes are arrested by the police on the slightest pretext and are regularly denied due process of law. The outstanding Negro leader in Clarksdale is Dr. Aaron Henry, a pharmacist. Recently his store was severely bombed. The men responsible for this crime were apprehended and confessed their deed. But they were released without punishment. Their excuse was that they were just "having fun." On another occasion the nationally prominent entertainer, Dick Gregory, was appearing for the NAACP in the Centennial Baptist Church. On this night the church was surrounded by members of the Clarksdale Police, including the Police Commissioner. A bomb was thrown into the church and many people ran out in panic and fear. Despite the presence of the police and the due report of this incident, no assistance was given and no investigation made. Policemen parked across the street simply laughed when people ran from the church.

The list of grievances is endless and the injustice is intolerable. For a long time responsible Negro leaders have sought to build some kind of communication with the white community. They have asked for a bi-racial committee which might discuss and alleviate some of the tensions. But the white community has absolutely refused to negotiate or even to hear what the Negroes have to say. After this total rejection of

all of their entreaties, the Negrow leaders appealed to the newly created Commission on Race and Religion of the National Council of Churches. Several of the top denominational and National Council leaders went to Clarksdale seeking to aid in the building of some kind of bridge of understanding between the white and Negro communities. But they met with almost total rebuff. Then it was that they decided to call upon the member communions of the National Council to send representatives to Clarksdale for a dramatic Christian witness for understanding and justice.

Thus it was that I found myself in the midst of a heated racial conflict in the company of about thirty white clergymen (one was a courageous and lovely lady editor) who had come from some of the far corners of our nation. The list of these persons was something like a Who's Who of American Protestantism. Most of them live in a comparatively genteel society but they knew that at that moment justice had no intention of manifesting itself gently.

The rally that night in Clarksdale opened my ears and eyes to dimensions of reality of which I had formerly had only the dimmest perception. I had the impression that I was in attendance at the modern counterpart of the old-time evangelistic revival. Everything that was sung and spoken contained the lilt and luster of true religion on the march and glorying in its finest hour. It was a long way and a far cry from the polite and restrained audience to which I had preached in suburbia three days before. There, historically speaking, the saw-dust trail had long since been swept away and replaced with a luxurious carpet. But in Clarksdale I was getting the answer to the question I had posed in my sermon: "What Makes the Church Great?" When that assembly for freedom sang "Like a mighty army moves the church of God" I experienced the greatness of the church. That experience became incarnational in nature when I heard this throng, many of whom had just been released from jail, improvise the words of one of their beloved songs to make it say: "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine, let it shine . . . on the Mississippi!"

Never was a scripture lesson more powerfully relevant and vital than the one I heard there that night. The Holy Word of God was lighted for me with a new revelation when I heard a Negro minister read the familiar words of the account of the Resurrection. As a preacher always eager for a new sermon idea I think I got one that night when in

that setting I heard the words of the Gospel of Mark: "And they were saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?' And looking up they saw that the stone was rolled back, for it was very large." (16:3,4) The truth of the Gospel hit me like a thunderbolt. Never before had I been so sure of what God had done in Christ, and I knew that at that moment he was acting for the salvation of all mankind, rolling back the stones from the tombs of death and oppression, in the specific location of Clarksdale, Mississippi.

There were many speeches that night and much of what was said was eloquent. A Negro pastor said in his prayer: "We know, O God, that it is easier to go to heaven than it is to bring heaven to earth." One Negro pastor declared: "They will have to find another means of punishment - We have taken the sting out of jail." One of the Negro leaders, a local funeral director, said: "The Negro is not afraid anymore - only the Chief of Police and the Prosecutor are afraid."

Following Wednesday night's rally the white ministers who came to Clarksdale were dispersed as guests to spend the night in Negro homes. The Rev. Worthington Campbell, an Episcopalian from New York City, and I were most cordially entertained by a young man and his wife. Their house was small and plain but the privilege of being welcomed into that Christian home was the highlight of these two days. Until late into the night and again in the morning we discussed many things and shared our mutual witness for Christ. After her husband had gone to work in the morning the wife told us something that touched me dearly. Her husband, she said, had been married before, and his first wife had died of a heart ailment. "But you know," she said, "she lived two extra years because of his great kindness toward her." Somehow that seemed terribly significant to me in a community of infinite cruelty. Truly that home was one of the most beautiful into which I have ever been invited as a guest.

At nine-thirty we gathered again at the Haven Methodist Church. There we were briefed and the plans for the all-important rally at the Negro First Baptist Church to be held at noon were discussed. The real test of our presence in Clarksdale was to occur when we walked in an orderly and silent procession the one and a half blocks to the Baptist Church down the street. We were told that there was the possibility of arrest. After a period of deep soul-searching and prayer, we formed into groups of eight and walked quietly

and solemnly into the street.

The street was lined with Negroes. The traffic was thick. Cameramen seemed to be covering our every step. A police car passed by. But we walked into the Baptist Church without incident. The church was nearly filled with people awaiting our arrival. I noticed that the men were, for the most part, dressed in shirts and ties. The ladies were attired in pretty dresses and hats. They were "dressed up" for the occasion. Then there began another rally for freedom and civil rights which placed us all in the front ranks of a major revolution. This time there was a long procession of prominent white clergymen who went to the pulpit to declare themselves - and all of us present - on the side of the revolution. Dr. Robert W. Spike, Executive Director of the NCC commission and organizational leader of the entire group, spoke movingly for all of us when he declared that there was, under Christ, no alternative to our participation in this movement.

Following this rally a deputy sheriff appeared to serve each of us personally with an injunction issued in the Chancery Court of Coahoma County, Mississippi. The National Council lawyers, present for the protection of our civil rights, read the terms of the injunction and then gave it as their professional opinion that nothing we were doing or planned to do was in direct violation. Therefore we followed our plan of calling by twos on the white ministers of the community in the hope of persuading them to negotiate in Christian unity with the Negro leaders.

The Rev. Jerry Forshey of Chicago and I were given the assignment of calling on a Methodist minister. We must have walked two miles to the edge of the city to a beautiful, brand new church. Except for a Negro caretaker the church was deserted. We were informed that the minister was out-of-town. On our way back we were constantly followed and "bird-dogged" by police cars. I noticed that each of the police cars contained four officers. When we returned to the church for a sharing of our experiences we learned that almost every team had been followed by police cars in the same manner. When all had returned the reports were discouraging. Only three ministers had received us. The others either would not appear or were out-of-town. Though one or two of the ministers visited indicated feelings of concern for the situation, the general impression was that the white Christian community of Clarksdale had met our entreaties with iron-willed

intransigency. We were saddened but not disillusioned.

My participation in this witness in Clarksdale compelled me to think a great deal about the office of preaching. Certainly in these days preaching cannot be conceived as a pleasurable profession or one of the performing arts. In Clarksdale I heard Negro laymen talking about the place of their preachers in the struggle for equal rights and freedom. It was reported that recently Charles Evers, the brother of the murdered NAACP official, Medgar Evers, had advised a rally in Clarksdale to demand the participation of their preachers. A courageous Negro woman who introduced at our rally those persons who had just been released from jail, including two of her own daughters, said to the audience: "If your pastor doesn't participate, boycott him. If he wants to preach to us, let him get in the picket line. If he doesn't want to do this, remember him when the collection plate is passed." I interpreted this to mean that the words laymen are hearing these days from the pulpit are measured for authenticity by the visible participation and involvement of the preachers in the struggle for human rights.

Does this say anything to preachers who face genteel congregations in the quiet and prosperous white suburbs? I think it does! I think it says a great deal about our freedom and articulateness in interpreting what God is doing in Christ in our time. As we drove out of Clarksdale that day one of America's outstanding preachers turned to me and said: "You are a professor of preaching. Tell me something. A man in my church who has listened to two of my predecessors who were prophetic and liberal giants of Protestantism has just resigned from my Official Board because I invited Martin Luther King, Jr. to preach one Sunday. Now what's the use of preaching?" For the moment I remembered that someone had written a book on "The Romance of Preaching," and I knew that that was hogwash. But, I believe ultimately, he who asked this question will have gained in authenticity and persuasive power, and the Word of God to our generation will have been heard and heeded, because this preacher had stepped down out of his pulpit into a processional line marching faithfully and triumphantly for human rights, under God.

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