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The Christian Frontier in Race Relations

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In matters of race relations, as in all other aspects of the common life, we are confronted with an absolute demand of our Christian faith. This is not simply the demand of justice or of equality. It is the demand of brotherhood. That is the testimony of the Founder of our faith, of the saints, and of the enlightened Christian conscience today. The only questions open to profitable discussion are whether we possess the will to brotherhood and, possessing it, how we may best translate that will into living.

Among the difficulties which the American Christian faces in the presence of the race situation and the requirements of his faith is that of the frequent and total unawareness of his Christian duty. This is understandable when you think of a White youth in a Christian home who has never heard his parents (for whose religion he has high regard) utter a single word defining the relationship which, under the Christian ideal, should obtain between him and the Colored people of the community, or even of that household, and who observes that his parents' relationships with Negroes conform completely to a pattern which is entirely without Christian pretensions. This youth has attended schools where the teachers were good men and women by every standard which he knew—even faithful church goers. And yet in all of his school life he never heard one of them breathe a word concerning the duty of Christians or good citizens in relation to Colored children or Colored men and women. He has attended Sunday school and church all of his life but he has never known a Sunday school lesson that laid bare the Christian imperative in race relations and he has never heard his minister suggest once that the racial pattern of the community was at variance with the religion he taught.

Thus, this American Christian lives his life in complete or almost complete unawareness of the Christian implications in the question of race relations. He employs Negroes or fails to employ them, addresses them, charges them in simple conformity with custom. He differs from others in his attitude toward them only as he is more or less of a gentleman.

Christian Responsibility Must Be Clear

It is obvious, in the light of this situation, that the first great task of the Christian community is to make unmistakably clear the Christian responsibility of men in their race relations. The Christian parent, the Christian teacher, the Christian minister who fails to give a central place in his message to so critical a problem as this is an apostate to his calling and will fall surely and woefully under divine judgment.

The second problem facing the Christian is that of summoning the will to act once his duty is clear. All of us experience the difficulty of living according to the Christian standard even when our community is in sympathy with such an effort. The problem is far more difficult when the violation of custom and the alienation of one's social world are involved. There is, however, one simple and indubitable fact: one must either exercise the will to righteousness in this matter or forfeit one's membership in the genuine Christian community.

Unhappily, most Americans who qualify for membership in the nominal Christian community would not be eligible were the community genuinely Christian. Their names are on church rolls, they may attend services, they have their Christian marriages, and will have Christian burials, but their lives, in so far as race relations are concerned, are as alien to the cardinal demands of the Christian ethic as if they had descended from another planet. The problems of the religious institution would be infinitely simpler if a distinction were possible between those who know the will of God and confess to their impotence to follow it and those who take up their cross and bear it, cost what it will.

Must Know the Way

The third great problem facing the Christian in the matter of race relations is to know precisely what path to follow once his will assents to righteousness. The minister can always expound his convictions privately but reason that a step in advance of his people will cost him his leadership and the opportunity to minister to the other mul-

tifarious religious needs of his people. There are subtle and very dangerous fallacies in this reasoning.

In the first place, this frail man is presuming to waive the clear, unequivocal demands of God in favor of a prospect of which he is the author and the soundness of which is nowhere guaranteed. He is open immediately to the suspicion of choosing a softer alternative. There is good ground for believing, moreover, that ultimately men exercise a far more profound influence upon people when they follow their inner discernings forthrightly.

The world has never been shaken out of its moral doldrums by men who placed a higher premium upon protecting their official relationships with men than upon charging their moral latency. The minister who, without intolerance and self righteousness, depends for his future upon his own moral resources and God's benediction will, in my judgment, speed the coming of the Kingdom a hundred times more swiftly than an eloquently preaching, christening, marrying, and burying parson who will not even risk a month's salary for his convictions.

Much depends, of course, upon the minister's conception of his calling. In low religion there is the medicine man, the conjurer, the preserver of tradition, the clanger of cymbals, the sounder of brass. In the religion which Christ taught — high religion — moral values are determinant and the prophet is central.

If the minister has a prophetic urge he must decide to what extent his message is to be conditioned by his concern for personal security and comfort. A man has the right to set the limit to his sacrifices for any cause. He must not lie, however. He must not set bounds to his moral adventures and at the same time proclaim himself a follower of One who set no such limits and countenanced in His followers the setting of no such limits. To do so is to take a position less moral and less constructive socially than that of the individual who renounces any claim to religion and professes to live simply within the bounds of his own insights and volitions.

While the minister is calculating the possible results of a forthright stand

in matters of race relations, he should envisage the effect of action in concert by the leaders of the church in his community. One congregation can easily discontinue the services of its minister. When three-fourths or all of the churches of a community are confronted with the choice between such a step and the countenancing of a position taken by their ministers in advance of their own convictions, action will be less precipitate. The probability is that such a community will make history, Christian history.

Leaders Must Lead

I venture the further prophecy that the demonstration of courage by the religious leaders of a community will encourage the expression of convictions long latent in some of the laity. Many persons whose deeper but unexpressed leanings are right will conform to customs throughout their lives in the absence of a person or an occasion to arouse their moral latencies. The responsibility of a moral leader is to awaken unawakened moral possibilities. He cannot know in advance in whom there lies the potentiality of rising above his normal way of life. His appeal, therefore, must be broad. If outer signs in his community are true indices to a universally deep conviction, he runs the risk of renunciation. A truer estimate of human nature invites greater optimism. Men are better than they seem. The mission of the Son of God and of His ministers is to evoke this latent goodness.

Christian laymen may plead that the time is not ripe for genuine acts of interracial brotherhood, that any "radical" act would set the cause back, and would be neither understood nor welcomed by Negroes themselves. Here is an excellent example of the service which the ingenious mind may render an impotent will.

One pronounces seriously that Negroes are unprepared for brotherhood across racial lines only when one's acquaintance with them is limited to an unbrotherly relationship. Members of the White community would be amazed at the bitter and thoughtful longings

borne in the hearts of Colored men and women on whom they have seen only the masks of servility. In church, in school, in the Army, in barber shops, on street corners, through the Negro press the masses of Negroes are not only being feverishly prepared for a new order of things but are making heated demands for it.

The question of giving time greater opportunity deserves longer consideration. It is true that we must live today within the limits of today's possibilities. The danger in race relations is that we shall underestimate what is possible now and that we shall undervalue the peril in such an underestimate. It is like abandoning an ill patient, whom to assist is inconvenient, with the reflection that nature in time will effect a cure. But time can never be depended upon to solve any problem.

Time may run out. That is, unexpected events which are catastrophic in effect, may intervene. Wars may come; atomic bombs may fall; doomsday may arrive. Moreover, time is neutral and from her womb forces of evil may be born as well as forces of good. To abdicate to time is to abandon our moral prerogative for immoral contingency. We are, in large measure, the determiners as to what time will bring, and to say that the time is not ripe is simply to admit that morally we are not ready. The answer is not in more time but in the will to act. It is instructive to see how clearly men realize this fact and seize time by the forelock when they are persuaded not only by moral demands but by considerations of their own convenience.

Christian Opportunity Is Now

None can mistake my conviction that Christians bear the responsibility to meet the demands of brotherhood in race relations and to meet them without delay. If Christians are unwilling or unable so to do, this they should confess and continue without apology to live by the standards of chambers of commerce, fraternal organizations, and gentlemen's clubs. So to live is not without some virtue and becomes increasingly virtuous when dissociated

from a religion the demands of which one does not purport to follow.

On the other hand, America and mankind need every living being who can by any effort be brought to the level of Christian living in race relations. Every moment we lose adds one more moment to our suffering. It is folly to think that we can have peace on a world scale when a nation like America harbors so great a national sin. By what process of thinking can a people who in hundreds of ways daily wound their fellow citizens and fellow Christians hope to engage in a guarantee of peace with other peoples? How can those who believe in the judgement of God harbor the hope that White men in America can escape the fruits of their interracial sins? How can those who believe in the love of God expect that the Negro people will be permitted much longer to suffer injury at the hands of their fellows?

I have just completed a trip south by rail and bus. I wish White members of the Christian community might have experienced my emotions as I stood in railroad and bus stations and heard Colored women, their trains ready for departure, call in anguish for service at ticket windows when long queues of White patrons at windows opposite were sold their tickets; as I rode on busses and saw Negro soldiers wearing battle stars forced uncivilly to the rear to make room for White male civilians; as I witnessed or re-witnessed for the thousandth time the un-Christian setting apart of a whole people by rails and chains and walls and signs; as I heard men and women talk of "our" people and "their" people upon a soil fertilized by the sweat and blood of all and in a land from which all have gone out equally to offer their lives.

Here is a chasm that must be closed; here are wrongs that must cease. Until justice is done, until brotherhood is achieved we shall bear witness in our bodies and spirits to a great apostasy and live under the shadow of imminent doom. Not only shall we bear upon our own souls the marks of our sin but we shall bequeath to our sons and daughters a scourge destined to trouble their lives and curse the land which gives them birth.