

Ed King

WHITE CHURCH (02)

Ole Miss Riots

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RESERVE

In the aftermath of the violence and rioting the clergy of the University and of the town of Oxford called for the people of the entire state to join them in marking the next Sunday as a "day of repentance". But, although the people of the state were shocked, there was not widespread popular or clerical support for repentance. In the town of Oxford most of the major white ministers did use this theme in their pulpits. The Memphis "Commercial-Appeal" newspaper, with a wide circulation in north Mississippi, printed a long and favorable report on these sermons, saying, in part:

At First Presbyterian Church, the Rev. Murphey C. Wilds said townspeople should repent for all those persons who produced the strife and "for all who remained silent when we should have spoken."

"There should be no resentment or bitterness toward those troops of the National Guard, many of whom we know, and the other troops we do not know, who brought order out of chaos, and are maintaining that order."

The Rev. Wayne Coleman delivered a similar message at First Baptist Church, where he urged his congregation to be "thinking, reasonable people."

"We have sinned in not being the best of citizens, in not assuming our responsibility as citizens," said the Rev. Mr. Coleman. "We have not loved as well or done what God wants us to do."

"Laws we don't like are better than anarchy, insurrection and bloodshed--better than insecurity and fear."

At Oxford-University Methodist Church, the Rev. Roy A. Grisham said the next generation of Mississippians would pay for the rioting and death which accompanied desegregation at Ole Miss.

"Every Mississippian is guilty for the situation we are in. Think about this. Pray about it. Take it seriously. Don't let your conscience be your guide if it's too full of prejudice."⁴

These white ministers of the Oxford area responded to this particular crisis with a strong voice. Their courage, shock, anguish, and love for Mississippi are evident. But nothing had been done prior to the crisis and nothing was done afterwards to sustain such thinking and preaching.

The strongest sermon preached in Oxford that Sunday morning was by the Rev. Duncan Gray, Jr, pastor of St. Peter's Episcopal Church. Gray, son of the Episcopal Bishop for the state, was not making his first analysis of the racial crisis in Mississippi. Although he left the Oxford church within a year he remained in Mississippi and became a leader in the moderate Mississippi Council on Human Relations, the first ^{modern} interracial organization in the state. His sermon after the riots was given as the words of a concerned Mississippi minister to

a congregation of Mississippi people. He spoke of the responsibility of everyone, not just for the ten days of madness before the violence, but of the preceding ten years and longer in the state. The sermon that Sunday is probably the most significant preached in the ^{white} pulpits of Mississippi during the entire period of the Civil Rights ~~struggles~~ struggles of the fifties and the sixties. Although typical only of a few other sermons preached in the state that special Sunday, portions of this sermon are very helpful in understanding the church, and, especially, the silent moderates in Mississippi:

... What can we learn from our tragic experience?

The first thing we can do is to face up to our own guilt in the situation. You and I didn't go out there and throw bricks and the bottles. You and I didn't go out there and fire the guns. You and I, along with every other Mississippian, are responsible for the moral and political climate in our state which made such a tragedy possible. Maybe you and I didn't do much to create this climate, but if we didn't, it is certainly evident that we did all too little to dispel or change it. The decent, respectable and responsible people of Mississippi have failed, when events like those of last Sunday night can take place within our state.

What has been the climate in our state during the past several years? You know and I know that it has been one of fear and intimidation; one of defiance and irresponsibility. The official line of massive resistance to any form of desegre-

gation and of last-ditch defiance of the Federal courts was laid down, and anyone who dared to challenge it found himself in deep trouble.

Above all, the people of Mississippi were told by their leaders over and over again, that the Federal courts could be defied forever; that they would never have to obey the law of the land.

Think of the freshman at Ole Miss today. He was only 10 years old when the Supreme Court's decision on segregation was handed down--and a senior today was only 13. Theirs is the generation that has been exposed to textbook and library censorship, mandatory essay contests on white supremacy and a massive propaganda campaign against the Federal courts. Is it any wonder that they feel persecuted and oppressed?

Think of the freshmen and upperclassmen as well who were out there throwing bricks and bottles the other night. Who could really blame them when the Governor of the state himself was in open rebellion against the law; a living symbol of lawlessness?

Think of the thugs and the toughs from near and far who did the most damage Sunday night and nearly all the damage Monday morning. What could you expect when supposedly responsible

legislators were saying, "We will never surrender," and "The people of Mississippi know what to do." What could you expect when so much of the Mississippi press was voicing the same sentiment?

The point is, we cannot blame this tragic business only on thugs and irresponsible students. The major part of the blame must be placed upon our leaders themselves; and upon you and me and all the other decent and responsible citizens of Mississippi, who have failed. We have failed our children, our university and our state. It is for this that we pray God's forgiveness this morning.

But true repentance means more than just remorse. It includes also a redirecting of our will and our efforts. We must now give our all to salvaging the situation; to bringing order out of chaos, peace out of strife.

In short, we must accept the fact that the color of a person's skin can no longer be a barrier to his admission to the University of Mississippi.

To think and act otherwise--to continue to breathe defiance and disobedience-- will only bring more suffering and shame. It will only mean more of the same violence and horror that has shocked us so deeply.

This is what worries me most about the efforts of so many Mississippians to pin

the blame for last week's violence on the Federal marshals. If our only response to this tragic event is to start pointin^g the fⁱnger of blame at other people then we will never solve our basic problems. If we are not mature enough and secure enough to admit and confess our own guilt, then we will never get around to doing anything about the real root of our troubles: the moral and political climate in which we live. And we will have to go through again and again the horror of more violence and bloodshed. It will all have been for nought. We will have learned nothing.

But I, for one, look to the future with faith and confidence. I am convinced that most of the decent and res^{pons}ible people of the community have learned the lesson we must learn from last Sunday's madness.

By God's grace, some real^l good can come out of this tragedy. And it is up to you and to me to see that it does.⁵

The words and the spirit of the Chrisitan ministers of Oxford on that Sunday of Repentance were the finest expression of the best that was possible in the traditional religion of Mississippi. These ministers were denounc^{ed} by members of their own denominations and by the White Citizens Councils. The theme sounded across the state, by the press, the politicians, the schools, and even some pulpits was that all the violence at

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Ole Miss was provoked by the Federal government. The Citizens' Council ~~...~~ proclaimed that the "Oxford clergy (were) wrong in calling for 'Repentance, '1"5

In their official magazine the Citizens' Council printed answers (and attacks) to the Oxford clergymen by two popular conservative Mississippi preachers, one a Protestant minister, the other the Rabbi of Clarksdale.

The ^{Rev.} Albert H. Freundt, Jr., pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Forest, Miss., and former college teacher and Moderator of the Presbytery of Central Mississippi, wrote:

Just how repent^{ant} should the people of Mississippi be for the violence that resulted from the efforts of the Federal Government to enroll the negro James Meredith in the University of Mississippi? Some Oxford clergy issued a call for Mississippians to make Sunday, October 7, 1962, a day of "repentance for our collective and individual guilt" in connection with the riots at Ole Miss and the town of Oxford.

It is surely doubtful that more than a few of our State pastors, if any, complied with the request by leading their congregations in the paths of humility and penitence. For one thing, our people do not care to shoulder the sins of others, or, even if it were possible, to repent

for someone else's errors. Most of our people are deeply resentful that one of the Oxford clergy condemned our Governor as "a living symbol of lawlessness." To say the least, this was a highly irresponsible statement, when the Governor was acting within the Constitution and the laws of the State.

A call to repentance is always appropriate for human beings... (but)... it seems that they (the Oxford clergy) were asking Mississippians to repent for the sins which they feel others have committed. The call could well have been to forgive* rather than to repent!*

This preacher's message continues on in detail. Some quotations will show more of the typical thinking of educated religious citizens of Mississippi. The style and scholarship of this minister make his message one that is especially appealing to most white citizens.

Nonetheless, we were asked to repent. Are we to repent of the encroachment of our States' Rights? Are we to repent for trying to defend these rights? Are we to repent of the Federal Government's error of trying to legislate morality and social customs? Are we to repent of our deep convictions that integration is either wrong or most unwise? Are we to repent of supporting our State loyally in this crisis? Most of our Christian people and clergy regret the violence that occurred at Oxford and would deplore creation of any situation in which private parties take the law into their own hands.

*EK: NOTE. Underlining mine; italics in original printing.

Let us suggest a few reasons why we have not asked our people to repent in this particular situation. First, we prayed before this crisis arose that God would grant guidance and wisdom to the Governor and the President in this matter. Second, we have continually deplored strife and violence from the pulpit. Third, we feel no guilt for a set of circumstances not of our own making which was forced upon our people and our State.

It is the conviction of most Mississippians that their rights have been violated. As an individual citizen of the State, we share this belief. We have not discussed the political ramifications of this issue from the pulpit, mainly because that is not the place for such interpretations. The ministry of preaching should be reserved for the Word of God.....

But we believe that if Churches have no right to invade the civil and political sphere, neither are civil governments to invade the religious and social spheres.....

The issue seems to be one of States' Rights versus Federal control of education and our social structure. It is not the privilege and duty of Christian pastors to take sides in this issue, committing the membership of their congregations to one position or another. And it is surely not the right of a pastor to condemn his people if they do take sides.

A call to "repentance" would have been successful, and we would have joined it, if the whole nation had been asked to pray for the preservation of our Constitutional rights, for wisdom on the part of the President to refrain from acts offending law-abiding citizens and creating sincere resistance, and for repentance on the part of those men who, under cloak of religion, have gone around the country to incite strife between the races and disobedience to local laws.⁷

The message of this minister would have never appealed to the vast majority of the white citizens of Mississippi if it had been preached beneath a fiery cross in a cow pasture. But such an articulate, intellectual, moderately worded message was the type communication favored by the Moderates, and the kind of message that would guarantee that the Moderates remained silent, if not encouraging them to give every assent to the actions of Governor Ross Barnett and his advisors from the White Citizens Council and their allies.

When this minister writes that he has "constantly deplored strife and violence" he is, no doubt, describing the action of the vast majority of ministers of every denomination in the state. To most of these men, and to almost all of their congregations, such a statement was understood

as an attack on the only acknowledged sources of violence, Civil Rights demonstrators. At this date, the fall of 1962, it was not a two-fold reference, including such pro-segregation sources of violence as the Ku Klux Klan. Prior to Ole Miss the Klan had not made any major appearance in Mississippi. For a minister to denounce violence from the pulpit was quite encouraging to the congregation; it was clearly an attack on their enemies and many church members probably thanked their God for the courageous, prophetic style of their preacher.

The white people of Mississippi were known for at least two characteristics present during the entire history of the state. The "frontier" spirit of quick tempers; hot-heads; emotional, fiery, demagogic leaders; lawlessness; and the use of violence, personal or group, to quickly and totally settle problems, had somehow persisted in Mississippi from territorial days in a more visible pattern than any other Southern state. Along with this was the religious fervor of the people. Mississippi prided itself on the number of churches; on support of foreign missions and other approved church activity; on the important place of religion in the whole society. Thus these people, more apt to turn to violence and personal action than other Americans, told themselves that they were the most "spiritual" of Americans and

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regarded Prayer as the appropriate answer to all problems.

((Of course these people had prayed about the racial problem. They sought "God's guidance," and they desired that "Thy Will be done." But before the shock of the deaths and violence at the University (and the greater shock in 1963 of having to face--and see arrested--those Negroes at the church door) there was almost nothing said by most of the Christian leaders of the churches of Mississippi that would even help the Moderates to question the exact nature of the Will of God or that God's guidance might have anything to do with a change in directions. It was somehow possible for these spiritual people to be the strongest advocates of Secession (Mississippi always regretted letting South Carolina be the first state to pass the Ordinance of Secession; Mississippi was a close second.). It was somehow possible for these spiritual people to produce truly magnificent courage in their soldiers and endure terrible suffering among the citizens during the War Between the States. It was somehow possible for these spiritual people to produce the most violent reactions to Reconstruction and set the patterns for the rest of the South in this and, later, in the styles of segregation and discrimination. So in 1962 these

spiritual people were proud of the fact that they were the last Southern state to begin desegregation in public education. And these spiritual people who prayed so fervently about the crisis at Ole Miss saw their sons and daughters take up guns and rocks and bottles and wage war against the armies of the most powerful government on the face of the earth. The pastors could sweetly say that "Prayer is the answer to all things." But in Mississippi the spirituality of the people was a source of strength for the time of battle. The churches preached "Faith, not Works," and "Salvation by Faith alone;" but the works and deeds of the people defended the Faith on the field of battle.

In Mississippi everything had its proper place--every person, every institution, every idea. The statement of the Presbyterian divine that "... we believe that if Churches have no right to invade the civil and political sphere, neither are civil governments to invade the religious and social spheres...;"⁸ is a most proper "Credo" for the Mississippi Way of Life. And that Way of Life is inseparable from religion. The proper Mississippi exegesis of this passage is: "If God had not wanted it (separate races or whatever the 'it' might be) this way; He would not have made it this way." In its more crude form this was stated as: "If God did not

want the Nigras to be inferior, then why did He make them that way?" (Of course ^a speaker would add some comments to the point that good Christian white people, while not daring to judge God, would always be kind and look after these lesser creatures.) The "social spheres" mentioned in the Creed probably mean matters of ethics, morality, custom and tradition. Racial relations, not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, are thus not properly a civic concern. The ministers who could talk about such a thing as "religious and social spheres" could also strongly denounce the National Council of Churches and religious liberals for their unholy "social action" interpretation of the faith.

The major sources of the Christianity of Mississippi were the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist traditions. The emphasis on the Power and the Will of God, of everything in its ordained, appointed proper place, of Change being left to God, is from the Presbyterian, ^{Calvinist} side. The Baptists preached "Salvation by faith alone" and the Methodists agreed but preached the importance of showing this salvation in proper behavior in everyday life. It all fit together very well. The other religious groups of the state just had varia-

tions of the main themes. There were slight differences, but only in style, in the faith of the Episcopalaism (who thought like the rest of the white citizens, but whose main emphasis was Style) and the Fundametalists on the Lower Class bottom of the society (who also believed the same things but stressed the Heaven-Hell theme and offered their members an emotional conversion experience and some possibility of ecstasyy in their religious life when the society itself offered them little but hardship.) As well as being friends, comrades, and neighbors, white Mississippians were often blood relatives, cousins of fairly complicated computations, and truly an inclusive family. To be an unquestioning, accepted member of this family could be a beautiful thing.

If America had not already claimed it, Mississippi would probably have chosen, "In God We Trust," as the state motto. As it is the motto is "By Virtue and Arms." The American slogan is assumed to be part of the whole and, together, "God, Trust, Virtue, and Arms" is a most appropriate and most powerful combination. The "arms" here is, naturally, the Sword--or the Shotgun.

(For white faithful Mississippians to hear the Negroes of the Civil Rights Movement singing, "God is on our Side," must have been especially infuriating. Such words in such a place could only be understood as the worst possible heresy, the clearest evidence that the Negroes were not just talking about some slight improvement in their economic or political standing, but the Movement was a total threat to the totality of the Southern Way of Life. The students in the Battle of Ole Miss, as their fathers and their fore-fathers, were not just defending segregation--or slavery-- but their homes, their Churches, their God, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.)

It is not surprising that the rest of America did not understand Mississippi. America (in this wider sense) did not want to understand Mississippi--although quite willing to tolerate Mississippi as long as possible. The Mississippi combination of trust in God and virtue and arms was truly an all-American formula. Perhaps America was afraid to truly understand Mississippi. Because Mississippi was not and is not really that different. Mississippi is unique

in its extremism--its extremism openly expressed and acted out. This extremism reveals the essence of one possibility of America. White tribal chauvinism, a heritage of sacrifice and hard work, a sense of destiny, a believe in both Providence and the Individual, when combined with Trust in God, Virtue, and Arms (whatever ultimate Power man can design and wield) produced Mississippi--the courage, the endurance, the love within the fellowship, the paranoid fear of the Outside and the Different, the Will to Win,---the Good and the Evil, the Best and the Worst of the American heritage. The "differences" of Mississippi only show the ultimate possibility of America. In some way the rest of America, South as well as North, does understand all of this and , while often following the unacknowledged leadership of Mississippi in patterns of race relations or the total use of power as appropriate solutions to problems, America is still afraid of Mississippi, looks down on Mississippi, despises Mississippi. For Mississippi, above all the rest, is the "All-American State."