

1EK41.06

Most white Mississippians were neither willing to "repent" nor to "forgive" after the Federal government enforced desegregation following the Ole Miss rioting. However, despite the wishes of the Citizens' Council there were some ministers who expressed doubts about total support of segregation--and the now evident violence and rioting used to defend segregation. In the fall of 1962 there was a period of self examination by a small minority of churchmen--but any such thinking and talking was to admit that there might be more than one side to the race question. Such an admission was the beginning of all heresy as well as the beginning of moderation.

Several Methodist ministers, especially in the northern part of the state near the town of Oxford, preached on both the repentance and the self examination themes. People were listening; so the extremists moved to silence these ministers.

The individual minister, in almost every denomination, felt very much alone and did not realize that other clergymen in other towns were thinking some of the same new thoughts. So, with no organization and little communication between moderate ministers or moderate laymen, most of these ministers

(also unsure of themselves and disturbed personally by their own reflections) soon grew quiet. Some of the Methodist ministers appealed for help from their Church authorities, if not in support of some moderate position on the race issue, at least to support the right of the ministers to talk about the crisis.

Bishop Marvin Franklin, leader of the two ^{white} Methodist Church Conferences in the state, had done almost nothing to help his ministers in previous years who needed support for their positions of moderation, and for freedom of the pulpit. But during the tensions of 1962 the Bishop did write a statement trying to support his ministers which was printed in the church paper:

The Church has the right to expect her ministers to be a voice in the pulpit declaring what he believes God would have him say.* What he says may not always please all who hear, but the congregation must insist that he is a prophet of God and not a panderer of meaningless platitudes.⁹

The Bishop went on to use one of his favorite illustrations explaining that a minister should be more than a thermostat just registering the popular climate around him and keeping things that way. He was sincere; he did mean well; he was

hopeful (perhaps sure) that such thoughtful words from the Bishop would be enough to calm the confused (and often angry) church members. These were the strongest words the Bishop could use--without changing his own comfortable style. That he was not willing to do. (As a Bishop of the Methodist Church the man had great powers, which he never used for good, such as the absolute authority to tell a church that they could not fire a moderate minister. Or, when a minister did resign a pulpit as a form of protest, the Bishop could have assigned another moderate to the job, or even left the church without a minister. In the Methodist system it is the Bishop, not the congregation, who has final, and absolute, authority over pulpit assignments. This Bishop, willing to use his power to preserve the status quo, the world and the church as he found it when he became the leader (with just a few more new church buildings, new church members, and--hopefully-- a slightly improved moral atmosphere), was not willing to use any of his power--his authority, his respect, his words, or his witness--to assist, or even protect, his ministers who advocated moderation (change in this context.) In the Christian Church the Bishop is the Shepherd of all the

flock; for the ministers the Bishop is their only Shepherd. In the crisis of the coming of change ^{to Mississippi} this Bishop could grieve that people could treat each other in such a way. This Bishop loved the beautiful and the peaceful. He understood the role of the church as that of the Comforter. As the wolves howled and began to attack his ministers, the Bishop still acted as if the role of Christianity was to lead people into the Beautiful Garden of Prayer, among the lillies-of-the-valley, on the peaceful shores of Galilee, to walk and talk with the Friend who would one day lead us all home. In Mississippi, as his ministers and their messages of repentance and moderation were being destroyed weekly, the Bishop never again could even say words with the potential power of this message on the free pulpit; there was never any action in support of the words. The ministers, the wolves, and the silent church members understood the emptiness of words without action in a time of crisis. Without action to give life to the words, the major accomplishment of such words was to bring peace, comfort, and an easier conscience--to the Bishop.

The Methodist Bishop is assisted in administering numerous churches and people his by a "Cabinet" composed of the men he

names as "District Superintendents." In a case such as Mississippi where the Bishop is not a very strong figure, these assistants sometimes become very powerful. Such men have the possibility and responsibility to assist ministers in trouble over such matters as freedom of the pulpit. This group of six men in the North Mississippi Methodist Conference actually included some men who favored a moderate approach to desegregation as well as being willing to support the ministers who made controversial statements. The group of six District Superintendents in the southern part of the state, the Mississippi Conference, were far more conservative and included some strong segregationists. The Bishop worked with both Cabiness. In North Mississippi some ministers lost their churches--but were usually given another church assignment in the state. In southern Mississippi ministers who were controversial were not supported and usually were soon driven out of Mississippi. (The ministers favoring moderate desegregation were still so few, even in the North Mississippi Conference, that there words and action did not bring about any rallying of the moderates to moderation; if the ministers had been more successful the opposition to them might have been greater.)

In the crucial months following^d the Ole Miss riots the District Superintendents of the North Mississippi Methodist Conference gave support to their ministers who chose to speak on racial matters. This support was assured to the individual ministers and influential laymen in the local churches were contacted by the District Superintendents and asked to listen-- even if they did ^{not} agree--to the ministers. The District Superintendents made a strong public endorsement of the right of ministers to speak:

The critical days through which we are passing demand dedication, self-denial and sacrifice in preaching the whole Gospel without any reservation whatsoever, with the fear of God in our hearts and without prejudice towards any man.... We affirm the freedom of the pulpit*. We have utmost confidence in our ministers and support them in the preaching of the whole Gospel in the spirit of Christ.¹⁰

Some white church ^{people} were honestly trying to understand how "this" (both the violence of their own people and the invasion of the federal troops at Ole Miss) could have happened ^a in peaceful Mississippi. Such church ^{people} appreciated the efforts their ministers were making at understanding. Some men looked at the days and weeks of insanity immediately prior to the Oxford explosion; others looked at the past decade and the activities of the White Citizens' Councils and the demagogery of the politicians. But some wise men looked at the whole history of America. Such examination, by any people in any time of crisis, is painful--so painful that the moderates whose voice is so needed may prefer to listen to their leaders who ~~say~~ claim to have all the answers rather than to come to grips with "facts," or new ways of understanding the present and the past.

The editors of the Mississippi Methodist Advocate did make such an effort, and, since it was painful to think and write these words personally, knowing how painful such examination would be to Mississippi white churchmen. While the politicians were claiming that the troubles of the South started with the Kennedy^s or, slightly earlier, with the Communists, the church newspaper said, "The South's Troubles

Go Back Many Years:"

During these days of extreme tension in our state, we might do well to look at some facts which have lead to our present dilemma. Unpleasant as it is to face the facts, we have to do it sometimes in order to get a better understanding of why events take the turn they do. In discussing racial troubles, we have been inclined to dismiss the subject by blaming it on outside agitators, the government and the Communists. Such answers generally satisfy because it rids us of any blame ourselves. Too, we who enjoy full liberties and freedom want to keep our minds off of the inequality issue.

It would be well for us to have the courage to face some very pertinent facts of life about ourselves as Christians who enjoy the Christian fullness of life....¹¹

Such words as these may seem the very essence of wisdom and moderation. But this was a very radical and necessary thing to do for that group of Americans known as Mississippians in the fall of 1962. The editors talked about the constant contradictions between Christian and democratic ideals and the treatment of Negroes in America. They started their

lengthy analysis with slavery and criticized both the Southern slave owners and the rest of the American people and their national government which "failed to recognize that the Negro had any political or economic rights."¹² The tragedy of the Civil War and the later efforts to guarantee the political rights of Negroes was mentioned. Then the new Southern doctrine that was approved by the rest of the nation: "We developed the idea of 'separate but equal' facilities for all Americans; the 1896 Supreme Court upheld this concept. We were happy with the separate theory but did not concern ourselves too much with the equal provision..."¹³

The powerful editorial concluded with this message:

We need to recognize the rights and wishes of others and cease trying to impose our way on them. This calls for understanding which in turn calls for communication. When we closed the doors to communication between the races, we made another mistake. We can well afford to open the door to understanding by listening to what America's tenth man has to say about his inalienable rights and his desires in his "land of Liberty."¹⁴

This same Mississippi church paper, from examining the crisis of race relations in Mississippi in the light of traditional Christian and American standards, came to understand many things beyond Mississippi when judged in a similar way. Some weeks the paper had no comments on race or Mississippi matters but talked about the things that concerned Mississippi Christians in their wider role as American citizens. The appeal of Communism to underdeveloped nations was frequently mentioned; once this was just as an addition to traditional "missionary" articles, later it became a matter by itself with the editors asking Americans (their loyal Mississippi readers) to examine the wealth of this country and the way we treated and used the rest of the world. The church paper realized that there was also a "Cuban crisis" for the nation and Mississippians were especially bloodthirsty on this point (as they had been since slavery days when Mississippi sought to annex Cuba as a slave state). The standard American attitudes (this time even including the Liberals of the Kennedy administration) were questioned and criticized. In their approach to all mankind these Mississippi church editors used the under-

standing they had developed for the Mississippi crisis to understand American relations to the rest of the world. They frequently wrote editorials saying that America had to learn to listen to "other" men (just as Mississippi had to listen to Negroes) and that communication had to be^gin before any needed understanding between men was possible. Their words about Mississippi were applied then to America's approach to the world:

We (Mississippians--or Americans) need to recognize the rights and wishes of others and cease trying to impose our way on them.¹⁵