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- Integration: Great Dilemma of the Church
- Aston Jones at Long Last Released From Goergia County Jail on Bail - 2/19/64
- The National Observer - 12/9/63 (2 copies)
- The Jim Crow Christ
- Church Renewal - 12/63 - Volume 1, No. 1
- Statement of the Council of Bishops of the Methodist Church - 11/13/63

THE JIM CROW CHRIST

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by Milton Mayer

The pastor said he would rather see us afterward, in his study. We said we'd wait; we had plenty of time. When we were alone with him, he sat silent, and then sighed and said: "What you say is true, only too true. But if I invited Negroes to come to our church--"

"You'd have to beg them to come," said Harry, the crazy Irishman, "they don't go for that half-hearted invitation stuff. We're here to ask you to beg them to come."

A look of quick pain passed across the pastor's face, as if his toe had been stepped on, and then he began again: "If Negroes came to our church, our white members would fall away."

"From what?" said Harry, the crazy Irishman, "from their anti-Christianity?"

"Our church," said the pastor, ignoring Harry, the crazy Irishman, "would be empty."

"Except," said Harry, "for the least of them and for Christ."

"My church would be empty," said the pastor. "You've got to understand my position."

"What is your position?" said the crazy Irishman. "Are you running a box office or a house of God?"

"You have got to understand my position," said the pastor still ignoring Harry. "A minister can not be too far ahead of his congregation."

"Are you the shepherd of the flock or one of the sheep?" said Harry.

The pastor, by this time, appeared to be inured to Harry's impudence. "Of course, I agree with you gentlemen," he said, with emphasis on the gentlemen, "that the segregation of our colored brethren is deplorable."

"We didn't say it was deplorable." said Harry. "We said it was anti-Christian."

"Deplorable," said the pastor, and this time there was a note of firmness in his voice that suggested that the crazy Irishman was beginning to get to him, "but we have got to face the fact that the church can not get too far ahead of society if it is going to remain effective. I--"

"Now, wait a minute," said Harry. "I'll pass that one about the church remaining effective, but a minute ago you said the minister can't be too far ahead of his congregation, and now you're saying the church can't get too far ahead of society. Which do you mean?"

"Both," said the pastor, sharply. The rest of us all glanced at each other; the pastor had been caught off guard and had answered Harry directly. Somebody had to shut Harry up or he'd ruin us. But he'd ruin the pastor first. None of us said anything.

"How far ahead of the Jews was Moses when they built the golden calf? How far ahead of the disciples was Jesus when he went the route and they all ran out on him?" It was Harry, the crazy Irishman, of course.

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The pastor was getting mad. "I'm not here to discuss theological questions," he said.

"Well, we are," said Harry, "But maybe we're in the wrong place. Maybe we should have gone to the pub and talked to the publican."

That was too much for the pastor. He turned on Harry and said, "Yang man, a little Christian humility wouldn't hurt you."

"A little Christianity would hurt you," said the crazy Irishman, "and that's why you won't practice it."

Harry got up, clapped his hat on his head, and went out. The rest of us sat there, as red as the pastor. He pulled his frock coat together as if he was going to button it, and straightened himself up in his chair. That too time enough for his race to fade from red to white. "You will have to excuse my gentlemen," he said, "But I have a meeting. I want you to know that you are always welcome here, and that I am always at your service. That, after all, is my humble function here. And I want you to know also, that I approve heartily of your ideals, if not of your methods. You know, gentlemen," and now he began to spread out in his chair as if he were settling down for a long talk, "these things are complicated, complicated." He shook his head, obviously regretting that, though what he said was true, he had to say it. "These things take time."

"Two thousand years is long enough." It was the voice of the crazy Irishman coming through the first floor window from the sidewalk. This time the pastor looked as if he'd been stabbed in the back, and Harry's voice, as a matter of fact, had come from behind him. "Good-day, gentlemen, good-day."

Harry was dancing around outside. "I'm sorry if I spoiled your tete-a-tete boys," he said. "If it hadn't been for me, you might have got a cup of tea out of it. But you wouldn't have got anything else, and you know it."

"What did we get out of it this way?" said somebody.

"I'll tell you what we got out of it," said the crazy Irishman. "We let him know that we know that he isn't a Christian. Isn't that enough for one day?"

I sympathized with the parson, myself. He has a big family, a big house, a big car, and a big congregation. He doesn't do any actual harm, and I know he does a lot of good in a quiet way. He's even stood up a time or two on the race issue -- which is more than you can say for most of them. The only place he can't stand up is in his own church.

Well, that's a terrible way for a man to have to live, but we all live like that, more or less. We don't want to be crucified, and it seems as if the only way to avoid being crucified is to crucify.

That parson doesn't want to be like Christ. He's got to live -- or at least he thinks he does...

You never hear any of them anymore trying to justify their crucifixion of Christ, the way they used to, especially in the South, saying that Cain's

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sin was marrying a Negro woman or that the Negroes are the children of Ham who was cursed by Noah and condemned to father a progeny of servants. I suppose that it's something gained to get them to stop perverting Scripture. But it can't be much in God's sight. We are "made of one blood all nations of men." We are "all one in Christ Jesus." "We are all members one of another." They can't ignore Scriptures like that, not while God is around.

Christ died to save all men and there is no distinction of person or races in Holy Writ. There was the "dark-skinned king" at the Epiphany, the man of Ethiopia" whom Philip baptized in Acts, and the "Ethiopian" counsellor who persuaded the king to let him deliver Jeremiah from prison. If these three men were Negroes -- I can't find any others in Scripture, and I'm not sure these three were-- they were among the most glorious...

Racism and Christianity don't mix. The man who runs a Jim Crow church is an enemy of Christ, and there's no getting around it. His business and his only business, is to bear witness to Christ. If the Christian Church isn't Christian, it ought to get out of business...

(Note: The above article, slightly condensed, was reprinted by permission from the March 1949 edition of NEGRO DIGEST, 1820 S. Michigan Ave. Chicago. It will soon appear again in that publication. The author, Milton Mayer, was formerly assistant to the president of the University of Chicago and has been more recently a lecturer and free-lance writer. His articles have appeared in SATURDAY EVENING POST, HARPERS, FELLOWSHIP etc.)