

# The Christian Witness in a Revolutionary Age

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Not many years ago a Negro woman was riding in a railroad coach, approaching the Ohio River. As she crossed the Mason-Dixon line she was told that she would have to move into the all-Negro coach. As she rose wearily to comply she was heard to mutter under her breath, "God is getting mighty tired of this." She spoke more wisely than she knew. God has been tired of man's inhumanity to man for many years. When Amos preached against the sins of his people and of his neighbors in 750 B.C., man's inhumanity to man was the burden of his complaint. This was the basis for the judgment of God in instance after instance. After Ahab and Jezebel had seized the vineyard of Naboth, Ahab was intercepted by God's representative in the person of Elijah. There Ahab learned that God did not like the king's disregard of human rights and of the sanctity of private property (I Ki. 21:19).

Nathan's famous parable to David indicated God's displeasure with the exploitation of the poor by the rich (II Sam. 12:1-13). The great chapter on the shepherd and the sheep (Ezek. 34) shows God's intolerance of the strong who push around the weak. The philosopher Nietzsche criticized Christianity because it favored the weak at the expense of the strong. His philosophy helped produce Nazi Germany and the so-called "superman." But these and other passages make clear that God will not indefinitely tolerate a situation in which the poor and the weak are at the mercy of the strong and the ruthless. The implications of this for compulsory apartheid in Africa are rather clear.

Those who oppress the poor, the unfortunate, and the underprivileged are not numerous. Far more numerous are those who are unconcerned. Theirs is the sin of apathy, the sin of omission. When Jesus spoke of the rich man and Lazarus He did not specify the sins of the rich man which led him to hell, He simply noted that "the rich man fared sumptuously every day" while the beggar sat at his gate and hoped for a handout (Lk. 16:19-25). The only expressions of kindness the beggar experienced were given by the dogs who licked his sores. The irony of this feature of the story is that the Jews regarded the dogs as the lowest of beasts; yet Jesus

presented the dogs as being more compassionate than the man of wealth. The rich man ended up in hell, according to the account, simply because he did not care.

Cain represented the person who takes an attitude of irresponsibility saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God held Cain responsible. Among the severest denunciations to be found in the Bible are those directed against the people of Edom. The chief charge against Edom, as reflected among other places in the prophecy of Obadiah, was Edom's unconcern with Israel's suffering when in captivity (Amos 1:11, 12; Obad. 11). In the parable of the good Samaritan Jesus skillfully answered the question, "Who is my neighbor?" The Master showed that anyone in need is a neighbor, regardless of his nationality or creed or location. In the parable Jesus presented the religious leaders of the nation as showing apathy or indifference in the presence of suffering, so the villains of the story are the "best" people in Israel. The hero of the story turns out to be the Samaritan. The Samaritans were detested above all other people by the Jews, who considered them not only inferior but dangerous. Yet Jesus pictures the Samaritan as the hero because he showed concern. John wrote, "He that sees his brother have need and shuts up his bowels of compassion, how does the love of God dwell in him?" (I Jn. 3:17).

It has been said that the present generation has less concern and more apathy than preceding ones. In the past few months there have been some events that underscore what may be an increasing degree of social indifference. Perhaps the most glaring example of this is the fact that thirty-eight people in New York City did nothing while a young woman was being murdered in the street below. Her cries went unheeded while her assailant returned again and again to attack until she died. This has shocked the nation. Elsewhere a boy was seen in a pond of water, drowning. Two men stopped on the highway and since they could not swim they drove off, leaving him to drown. How can such callous apathy be explained, much less justified?

Recently, in Lexington, Kentucky, a Negro woman fell to the floor in a department store as the result of a heart attack. An ambulance was summoned and response was made by the leading funeral parlor of the city. Upon arrival the ambulance refused to take the woman to the hospital because this ambulance was for white people only. A half hour delay resulted until the "right" ambulance was available. The woman did not die, but might have.

More recently, in a distant state, a young husband rushed his wife fifty miles to the nearest hospital that would accommodate Negroes simply because the local hospital accepted whites only.

The sick woman did not die in this case, but her escape from death was narrow.

Not long ago in the United States a man believed to be a Negro asked the operator of a small lunch stand if there was a men's room nearby. He noticed a dilapidated wooden privy not far away. He was told that the nearest rest room was fourteen blocks away and he was on foot. Then, pointing to the shack he asked if he might step in there a moment. The answer was a curt, "No sir." This situation has been in existence for over a hundred years. But think of the instances in which American citizens, many of them Christians, have been denied the privileges other people take for granted. It staggers the imagination. God has been getting tired of this for some time. There are those that say that the Negroes are becoming impatient, that they are trying to rush things, that they would be docile if it were not for outside agitators, that it is wrong for the Federal Government to change the customs by the force of law. They argue that local authorities are all that are necessary to handle the situation. If this be true, why is it that one hundred years have not been sufficient time to cause Americans to treat other Americans as neighbors and as friends? Do the advocates of state rights really intend to correct injustices?

Why have not these and similar injustices engendered a greater degree of righteous indignation on the part of our good American citizens? How can one be so zealous in safeguarding his own rights and so unconcerned about the rights of his neighbor? Why has not the milk of human kindness played a greater role in race relations? Why has not sheer humanitarianism, apart from religion, ameliorated such conditions and exposed the shallowness of paternalism? Why have committed white Christians so frequently passed by on the other side?

Other questions press even more insistently upon the conscience of contemporary Americans. Why have not politicians, civic leaders and clergymen shown more concern and been more articulate in this respect? Is it not because too many of us have been "conformed to the spirit of this age" rather than being "transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom. 12:2)? If we deplore demonstrations in the streets as a means of awakening the conscience of fellow Americans, why have we not bestirred ourselves through sermons, through editorials, and through letters to our representatives during the past one hundred years? Another question that ought to give us little comfort is, "Why is it that during recent agitation in behalf of equal opportunity for all, liberal clergymen have been the leaders?" Afterwards conservative men have, to be sure, also voiced their approval in many instances. But why have

we conservatives been on the sidelines and in the background? Can it be that we evangelicals have been more concerned with preserving vested interests, treasuring our prerogatives, rather than concerning ourselves with those who have been denied these things we prize?

How can we best bear witness? The Christian way is not revolution but evolution, although Paul and Silas were among those who "turned the world upside-down" and although Jesus was condemned as a revolutionary. Nor is the Christian way normally that of civil disobedience. Perhaps the only one guilty of what could be called civil disobedience in the New Testament was Jesus when He cleansed the temple, not by persuasion but by force. Peter and John also were defiant and in effect engaged in civil disobedience when they refused to obey those who warned them not to teach in the name of Jesus. Conformity to this age is difficult to avoid.

Most people would say that the manner in which India overran the Portuguese colony of Goa was in violation of the letter and spirit of the United Nations and of the moral law generally. It was the case of the strong oppressing the weak. It was a case of settling grievances by force rather than negotiation. Just before the action of the Indian army against Goa this writer sat in the meeting of a World Council of Churches in New Delhi, India, and heard Prime Minister Nehru address the World Assembly. In the course of his talk Nehru emphasized that there is no grievance but what can be settled by persuasion, by conciliation, if we really want to do it that way. As he spoke, however, Indian armies were even then on the railroads converging on Goa. Two days later it was forcibly occupied by Indian troops. Many of the Christian leaders in India, both missionaries and nationals, justified the action of the government in settling the problem of Goa. Is not this an occasion of "conformity to this world"? Is this not an instance in which in spite of their Christian convictions, their judgment was distorted by involvement in a national situation. Conformity to the world is a peril difficult to recognize and still more difficult to be freed from. We are in danger of it every day of our lives. Only the grace of God can enable us to be "renewed" in the spirit of our minds to see things as Christ sees them and to participate on the side He is on.

How can we bear our witness? First, the witness needs really to be convinced himself. Moreover, crusades like the prohibition movement are possible only when people get aroused to the point of moral indignation, when conviction leads to courage, when righteous anger makes one articulate and vocal. Unholy anger is explosive, reckless, and shortlived. Righteous anger under the control of God is deliberate, farsighted, sustained, disciplined. There are

many ways in which the Christian today can express his witness in behalf of justice and equality for all. If a preacher or a Sunday school teacher he can do so as the expounder of the Word of God. If an editor, he can use his editorials to condition the people to this. Editors have a great challenge and a corresponding responsibility to guide the thinking of people in this time of social change. Letters to the editor can help. Letters to one's representative in the legislature or congress can help. One can work through the local service clubs or the Parent-Teacher organization or the Boy Scouts to express in precept and example the principle that all citizens should have an equal opportunity to realize their utmost potential. Members of churches can renounce segregation as a policy and make it clear that all sincere worshippers are welcome to communion, to public worship, to prayer. Property owners can avoid the covenants which restrict property on the basis of color, irrespective of the character of the buyer. Such clauses spring from a principle of selfishness and are inconsistent with the Christian way—a direct violation of the Golden Rule

Since passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Law there are many encouraging evidences of peaceful compliance. In the "Deep South," for instance, the mood seems to be that of compliance by a responsible and mature citizenry. The influence of community leaders is usually the decisive factor.

Evidence could be cited or case studies noted to sustain the thesis that entire sanctification and the grace of perfect love has done too little to eliminate race prejudice. There are those who profess to love God with all their heart and their neighbor as themselves who will not eat or worship with the Negro. The only relationship they will sanction is that of master and servant. The fact that full salvation could be preached and witnessed to for a century without encountering more involvement with the sin of race prejudice is not easy to explain.

Perhaps a clue comes from the New Testament where Simon Peter after Pentecost still was not free from race prejudice. However, race prejudice in which the color of the skin is a factor is a relatively recent and local phenomenon. Peter's prejudice against the Gentiles grew out of his Jewish background and was basically religious rather than racial. Strict Jews did not eat with Gentiles because of the danger of eating food that was unclean, that was contrary to the Mosaic law. Peter simply thought he was being true to his Old Testament heritage in this exclusion. It took the special vision at Joppa with directives from the angel to change Peter's thinking and his attitude. When he saw the Spirit of God poured out upon the people in the house of Cornelius in a similar way that he had seen it happen to

Jews, he realized that God did not make the distinction that he had been making. Peter's experience shows that even after one has been made perfect in love there often needs to be further conditioning. Education and experience are sometimes necessary to eliminate from one his misconceived ideas and prejudices. However, if one will walk in the light he soon will see that there is no place in his heart for sanctioning and preserving these prejudices that are unworthy of Christ.

In 1852 occurred the most potent single factor in the emancipation of the slaves—the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In it Mrs. Stowe pleaded with her nation, with the fervor of an Old Testament prophet, to repent. She warned that the alternative to repentance was judgment. In 1858 a nation-wide revival was God's last call to repentance. Judgment came in 1860-1865 and the scars of conflict are still with us. Will the issues and tensions of the 1960's evoke repentance and renewal?