

# Racial Integration and Prophetic Religion

GEORGE A. TURNER

The senator from Mississippi was on the radio program "Meet the Nation" being interviewed by reporters relative to his opposition to the confirmation of Justice Harlan to the Supreme Court bench. After stating that his objection to Harlan was the fear that he would prefer the United Nations to his own nation he was questioned about whether Harlan's views on segregation were a factor. The Senator replied that he favored segregation in spite of the Supreme Court decision declaring it unconstitutional and warned that public opinion in his state would not tolerate integration.<sup>1</sup> The reporters were able to point out the inconsistency of advocating unswerving loyalty to the Constitution, in the international sphere, and yet giving tacit approval to a sectional defiance of the Constitution within the nation. The havoc which prejudice plays on one's rational processes is typified also in the case of a county superintendent of schools in a border state where a "wait-and-see" attitude has been adopted. The superintendent had given considerable thought to the matter of integration and had just returned from a meeting of southern leaders discussing this issue. Yet when questioned about local compliance with the Supreme Court ruling, the superintendent professed to believe that the decision affected only the four states involved in lawsuits and was not a basic principle applicable wherever the Constitution has jurisdiction. Such instances confirm the generalization that "the Supreme Court decision outlawing racial segregation in the public schools put a strong searchlight on a chink in the moral armor of Southern liberalism."<sup>2</sup>

## SHOULD THE PREACHER BECOME INVOLVED?

During the next few years the issue of racial integration will be a live one. Should the pastor or evangelist become involved or

---

<sup>1</sup> In May 1954 the Supreme Court reversed an earlier decision, establishing the "separate but equal" doctrine, and handed down the decision that compulsory segregation, on the basis of race, is, *in principle*, contrary to the "free and equal" provision in our national Constitution.

<sup>2</sup> Golightly, G. L., "Southern Liberals Speak Only for Whites," *Progressive*, cited in *Time*, March 21, 1955, p. 37.

remain aloof from the issue? Should the pastor welcome Brotherhood Week and Race Relations Sunday, for example, as an opportunity to bring to bear on this subject the teachings of Christ or should he stick to preaching the Gospel and not be sidetracked by the numerous special days and interests? Should the church take responsibility for influencing public opinion in this matter or wait until secular agencies have effected the change in opinion and then tacitly accept them as changes which they had favored all along? These are issues which every pastor must face; he must make his decision. The alternatives apply not only to desegregation but to nearly every moral issue confronting a community. Some pastors are selective (and hence inconsistent) in the causes they champion or ignore. For example many are militant with reference to temperance but indifferent to racial discrimination. In this study the responsibility of the church as a leader in community mores (custom) is sought with special reference to the recent Supreme Court decision.

#### THE SUPREME COURT DECISION

The current issue of racial integration in the public schools goes back to Civil War days. The attempt by legislative enactment to force the majority opinion (the nation as a whole) upon the minority (the portion of the nation known as "Dixie") was not wholly successful. Under the banner of "states' rights" the minority sought to delay or defy the will of the majority, as expressed in the Federal Constitution. In 1896 the Supreme Court, in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case, defined the historic "separate but equal" doctrine declaring that "If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them on the same plane." At the same time the minority opinion, written by John Marshall Harlan (grandfather of the recent appointee), protested ". . . in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste system. Our Constitution is color-blind."<sup>3</sup> For a half century this historic decision set the pattern of public school education in this country. As most people know the "equality" was more theoretical than actual for Negro schools were usually inferior to other schools in every respect. In May 1954 the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in

---

<sup>3</sup> *Time*, Dec. 21, 1953, p. 15.

itself is contrary to the principle of equality and hence is unconstitutional. This was the outcome of litigation going back to 1950 when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People brought about five cases originating in South Carolina, Virginia, Delaware, Kansas and the District of Columbia, all designed to secure a decision from the Supreme Court that compulsory segregation is unconstitutional *in principle*.

From about 1870 to 1940 the rise of the Negro has been slowed by the political compromise of 1877. Then G. O. P. leadership and southern Democrats made a deal in which votes were exchanged for the promise that the states would be permitted to make their own policies toward the Negroes. The southern states immediately took steps designed to keep the Negro in an inferior status, as near to slavery as possible. The military academies at West Point and Annapolis quietly refused to admit Negroes during this period. The churches by example and precept sanctified the *status quo*, and actually aided in the entrenchment of segregation. Meanwhile Christian conscience, Soviet propaganda and Negro agitation for equality kept the question alive. What the Christian conscience seemed unable to do the legal section of the N. A. A. C. P., under the direction of its attorney Thurgood Marshall, has succeeded in doing. Perhaps now Christian consciences can belatedly aid in gaining an acceptance of the Supreme Court ruling. While this article can hardly hope to be consoling perhaps it can be provocative and remedial. The Supreme Court has decided that compulsory segregation is contrary to the Constitution. Our concern is to show that it is also unChristian—contrary to the Bible.

On the ground of anthropology it can be maintained, as Niebuhr and others have done, that race prejudice is an expression of man's moral depravity, his egotism, his tendency to idolatry and self-worship.<sup>4</sup> Discrimination is as old as human society. If a social custom could be hallowed by historical precedent segregation would be right indeed! India has practiced the caste system for centuries. The Spartans dominated the Helots whom they had subjugated much as the Hebrews made the Canaanites "hewers of wood and drawers of water," denying to them equal status. This is a familiar pattern in nearly all cultures—that of the dominant class seeking to

---

<sup>4</sup> See Eckardt, A. R., "Racial Prejudice and Discrimination," *Theology Today*, October 1954, pp. 355f.

protect its favorable position, its vested interests, by force. In modern times it is most glaringly apparent in South Africa where the principle of "apartheid" is employed to justify the efforts of the European minority to maintain its position of social, political and economic superiority over the native population. The fact that the leaders of the movement there are all active in the Dutch church makes more obvious the discrepancy between Christian profession and Christian practice.

The Bible is replete with condemnations of the tendency of man to "set at naught his brother" on such grounds as wealth, education, political power, or race. Strictures against the oppression of the poor by the rich are voiced in Amos and against the oppression of the weak by the strong in Ezekiel (ch. 34). James condemns discrimination based upon wealth saying, "If ye have respect of persons, ye commit sin, being convinced by the law as transgressors" (James 2:9). Since wealth is often an indication of diligence, discrimination by so superficial a thing as ancestry is even less justifiable. The New Testament Epistles, in stressing the equalizing effect of the Gospel, by implication rule out all such discrimination (e.g., Col. 3:11). The Golden Rule and the commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself" both condemn any policy designed to favor one racial group at the expense of the other. Those who defend segregation now seldom resort to the Bible, as some preachers did before the Civil War, but do so on the grounds of expediency, saying that the people are not ready for integration. The motive of such defense of segregation is usually the fear of losing one's status, a basic selfishness.

The Golden Rule, with its demand to put one's self in the other person's place, should in itself make clear that exclusion from school, church, restaurant and equal economic and professional opportunities is unpleasant. It follows that the imposition of such a situation upon another is unChristian. In addition the command to love one's neighbor as one's self also lies across the path of any determination to exclude a fellow human being from equality of opportunity. These and similar Scriptural truths are not minor themes, in a few isolated passages of Scripture, but are among the grand central principles of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. There is, for example, far more Scriptural teaching on love and justice for one's neighbor than on total abstinence or entire sanctification as "the second blessing."

Why is Christian leadership so lethargic and Christian conscience so calloused here? If equality of opportunity is a Christian virtue, if a solicitude of the strong for the weak is Christian, if brotherly love is mandatory for the believer in the Bible, why was the church so indifferent?

One reason is fear of "stirring up trouble."

The Church is forever in danger of shunning absolute judgments that are clearly dictated by Christian principle for fear of putting too great a strain on its "fellowship." It is under that kind of treatment that the fellowship evaporates. . . . The moral judgment now crystallizing about race is akin to that which condemned slavery. It will not be abolished even in the Church at one stroke, but the important thing is that no congregation and no denomination should ever have a clear conscience while conforming to the pattern. If they can do so then the Christianity to which they subscribe is not that of the New Testament.<sup>5</sup>

"Conforming to the pattern," in this instance, is a form of worldliness. It is walking according to "the mind of the flesh" to use a Pauline phrase. Is it not the minister's duty to study, pray and obey in his own life and thought, a Christian response to the social pattern of segregation? Is it not his duty as a parish and community leader to use his influence on the right side of the issue?

Another reason for Christian lethargy is the failure to recognize that courage is among the Christian virtues. Timidity may lead to a false and superficial pacificism. There are times when fidelity to the truth is more important than either personal security or community peace. It is never Christian to sacrifice truth and moral principle to either tranquility or security. Furthermore, there is no real peace in the presence of wrong doing. President Eliot of Harvard replied to irate parents protesting the acceptance of a Negro student by saying, "If this applicant passes the entrance examinations he will be admitted and if all the white students choose to withdraw, all the resources of the institution will be devoted to his education."

Another reason for indifference to this evil is precedent or custom. A Christian business man, on his advertising calendars, urged attendance at the four local white churches. The two Negro churches were not mentioned probably because they did not come to mind. In planning a new public school building in a county with a Negro minority none of that race was represented on the Com-

---

<sup>5</sup> Editorial, "The Church and Race Segregation," *Christianity and Crisis*, April 1, 1946.

mittee and no provision for their future needs was mentioned. Minorities perhaps feel like one overlooked in an invitation to a party; whether the omission was deliberate or by accident it hurts to be ignored.

Should the situation be remedied by agitation on the part of the minority? The Christian answer is that the majority, with its vested interests, should do the unselfish thing and insist on equality for all. Fairness to the less fortunate should not be something wrested from the dominant group but something given by them. To the extent that the church is prophetic and Biblical it will be active rather than passive in promoting civic righteousness. Historically the church, following the pattern of New Testament ethics, has always urged its members to be law-abiding citizens. If the Supreme Court ruling is in harmony with the Bill of Rights, and with the Christian emphasis on the worth of the individual, the Christian has no alternative but to conform.

Progress is being made in many areas. The armed forces have abandoned segregation. The Atomic Energy Plant at Oak Ridge has decided to abolish segregation in its community. Many southern seminaries and universities have Negroes in their student bodies. Kentucky is officially committed in principle to implementing the Supreme Court decision. In Missouri segregation ended at several St. Louis schools with no unpleasant consequences. Several churches have taken a strong lead in promoting integration. The National Council of Churches at Evanston last August gave a ringing call to leadership in fighting racial prejudice and promoting brotherhood. The Southern Baptist Convention, where the issue is a live one, urged its churches to work actively for brotherhood and condemned segregation in principle.

Should the church be the shock troops in launching and sustaining the crusade for equality and the application of the Golden Rule or should it take the rôle of the medical corps and assist the wounded? It should not remain neutral. It should do more than repair the damages. It should patiently, tactfully, persistently and as peacefully as possible prosecute the cause for brotherhood as well as that of evangelism or temperance. This is education and more. It calls for information, for a catharsis of prejudice, ill will, and selfishness. It is doubtful whether implementation of the high ideals of the Bible and the Bill of Rights will ever prevail without the impetus of a moral imperative. Prohibition would never have

been adopted in this country as a result of education alone; it required the moral indignation of courageous women like Francis Willard and Carrie Nation, backed by the righteous indignation of many other women and men, to change the beverage habits of a nation. In a sense this calls for pioneering work by human engineers. This is part of the preacher's task. Racial prejudice has eaten at the vitals of church and state like a deadly cancer and no Christian should affect indifference to its menace.

The most compelling fact in the situation for both pastor and people to consider is that this declaration for equality of opportunity is a just law. Christians have no alternative but to obey constituted authority (Rom. 13:1-5). Seldom has a nation as a whole adopted and defined a law so distinctly Christian in its essence and so defiant of a well-entrenched "worldliness." It is a moral issue as well as a social one and the influence of the church should be unequivocal, positive, persistent, and even militant in pressing for its implementation. As one leader has put it,

After all, desegregation is not the law and we shall be revolutionaries to resist the law. . . . We ought to obey this law as upholding the Christian position. . . . The Court has put into the civil law what has been in God's law from the beginning.<sup>6</sup>

The minister should not evade his responsibility by suggesting that his parishioners follow the Lord's guidance in this matter; it is his responsibility to help them discover the Lord's will and then to carry it out. The next decade will be a sifting and testing time; the church's response to the challenge will be determined largely by the honesty and courage of her leadership.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ransom, Guy, "The Minister and the Supreme Court Ruling," *The Review and Expositor*, October, 1954, p. 534.