

1EK40:09

The strongest voice still alive in the Mississippi Methodist Church was that of Dr. Sam Ashmore, editor of the church paper. He was also due to retire soon. But he did not hesitate to use his position and the church ~~a~~ paper to print editorials directly opposite in spirit to the words of the Bishop and the words most readers wanted. But Ashmore knew that many people were moving towards moderate positions in race relations and needed some encouragement; and that other people were frozen and needed to be shaken. In the same edition that carried the Bishop's column watering down the Council of Bishops message on ~~church~~ opening the church doors and against the police Dr. Ashmore printed a long, powerful editorial written by George Harjes about the particular crisis the Bishop was trying to ignore. This item, titled

18

"The Church Is Of God," was printed on the page facing the Bishop's column. Portions of this message are printed here to show the ~~spirit/and~~ contrast with the words of the Bishop and the understanding and spirit that still existed in some parts of the white Methodist Church in Mississippi despite the purges of the ministers during the preceding ten months and all the fear created by the church arrests:

Whose church is this?.... Is it the church of the upper middle class, Anglo-Saxon white, all others barred from its threshold? Or, is it the Church of Jesus Christ, in which all persons are welcome?

"The Church is of God..."--have we forgotten? It is not a social institution entitled to all the privacy of the family. When it opens its doors to the public (not just the ~~the~~ membership), it spreads a welcome mat for all.... ..no one is a "trespasser" who would avail himself of its services. Only we who bar the gates, or commit our trust to civil authority, are "trespassers"--~~and~~ and, Lord, "forgive us our trespasses!"

"The Church is of God..."--it is not founded, financed, and furnished by local residents for the sole edification of these same people. There is no place in the Church of God for cordons of civil or church authorities barring entry to those without the proper credentials-- "outsiders who have come to disturb public worship".

....

In our enthusiasm for exclusiveness we just could close the door upon a messenger of God or a visitation of the Holy Spirit (Jesus Christ has been trying to get into some churches for a long time).

If our worship is ~~is~~ "disturbed" by the presence of "outsiders", then our worship needs re-examination. What can be more worshipful than the pricking of conscience, the disturbing of our well insulated minds,

the warming of our comfortably cool Laodicean spirit?... In our reverence for that which is less than God we may well be hearkening back to the days of Isaiah and Jesus who lamented, "You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the ~~commandment of God~~ traditions of men." Our problem is not the "kneel-in" but the exclusiveness to which it is addressed.

Christianity lost much of its vitality and message when it gained acceptance in the Roman Empire. The popularization of religion in America today has cost the Church much of its voice in community life. We have become identified with our culture rather than moulders of it. Those who dare to step out of line are reminded that their role is to reflect their environment like a thermometer rather than to control it like a thermostat.*

Indeed, the "Church is of God..."--in our desire to win the acclaim and financial backing of men we have compromised the faith and denied the fundamental inclusiveness of the Church in Christ. Only if we dare to lift a Cross now over the wrecks of time can we salvage the meaning, mission, and message of the Church in our day.¹⁹

The fear of trouble and turmoil, the equivocating words,
 and avoidance of action of the Bishop and so many white lea-

ders was not representative of the whole white Christian church in Mississippi. Even within the Methodist Church there were men who knew what was right and wanted to do it. The tragedy of Mississippi--of the Church and every other part of the life of the state--was never that all minds in the Closed Society thought as one. Dissidents were produced and they were legitimate products of the white society. But the good people, the possible moderates, for so long had let themselves be guided by their prejudices, their fears, and above all, by their desire for peace and stability that change (the most dreaded thing of all for no one knew the final meaning of change) could only come with some degree of crisis, some turmoil and great uncertainty. In the crisis the good people, more afraid of change itself than full of hatred for Negroes, had always let the worst elements of their society rule all the rest--because these elements promised order, peace, and the security of the status quo. And while the good men, the potential moderates, were cowed or deceived, the society through its extremist leaders destroyed the dissidents, the seekers, and those who asked the wrong questions.

For most of the history of Mississippi, of course, the times were quiet and there was no sense of crisis. Such days were pleasant--except for the poor and the Blacks.. And the dissidents were just eccentrics, to be tolerated or pitied by the good folk.