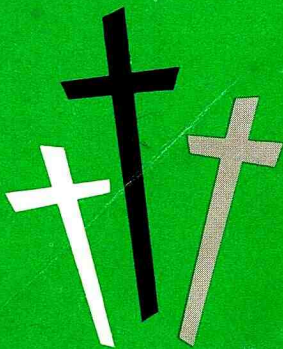


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Demonstrations

a twentieth century Christian witness

Whenever a man realizes that he is a child of God some sort of demonstration is inevitable. Conditions in this world are such that in the moment of realized sonship, man must act. This is what is happening across the globe at present: men are becoming aware of their innate worth and dignity and are demanding that they be accorded the same respect accorded the persons of highest earthly stature. What we are witnessing is a moment of mass self-discovery.

Thousands of heretofore bland creatures of the earth are suddenly repeating *en masse* the proclamation of Martin Luther, "Here I stand." Willingly they submit to violence and intimidation rather than retreat into the cloisters of inferior status. A civil reformation is in process, and young secular saints are shaking the political foundations of our society much in the same way that George Fox, John Wesley, or John Calvin shook Christendom during the Protestant Reformation.

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Another chapter in the story of redemption

If we look for a moment at the cultural milieu out of which these demonstrations occur, we may see the profound Christian significance of what is taking place in our midst. We may even witness another chapter in the great story of the redemption of the world.

The system commonly called segregation is no accident. It is the deliberate attempt to maintain control of human beings in spite of the fact that a Presidential Order and several acts of Congress had formerly set them free. The system was contrived to give a maximum of control over the minority and to insure their continued availability for exploitation.

In historical perspective

Enlightened Negro leaders of the Abolitionist period pleaded for three things: land, education, and the vote. Congress attempted to write these demands into law, but their power was not sufficient nor was the determination great enough to stand behind their legislature in a period of severe economic trial coming out of the war. Former slaves were given the vote, but they were denied the land which would have made their votes independent, and the education which would have made their freedom secure.

Southern politicians soon swept black men out of politics, and with the help of the Ku Klux Klan took away the principle of representative government of which the Negro is to this day deprived. Poll tax, grandfather clause, literacy test, white primaries, and violence soon completely deprived the freedmen of the right to vote. The plantation system was reestablished and tenant farming reenslaved Negroes to the land as surely as they had been enslaved to their former masters. Education was discouraged by the states; and, had it not been for the work of the churches during this period, there would have been very little education available for the former slaves. Our judicial system became an adjunct of this injustice, first by declaring the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional and then in 1897 approving the doctrine of "separate but equal."

The system of segregation

An outsider viewing these events might assume that an innocent confluence of events resulted in the system we now know

as segregation. A closer look at the situation reveals to us that this is a sophisticated adaptation of techniques of enslavement as old as the Egyptian and Babylonian captivity of the Old Testament, and as modern as South African Apartheid. It is important for us to realize this if we are to understand the present civil rights demonstrations.

A gifted few survive

It is true that a few gifted individuals are able to survive in this system. They are immediately grasped by those in power in an attempt to alleviate their own guilt. "Look at these," they say, "this system is not so bad. If you work hard you, too, may become a George Washington Carver or Ralph Bunche." To this we have to reply that every slave system has produced its geniuses, but this does not negate the fact that the masses of human beings are being deprived of their humanity and dignity through this calculated exploitation. The crowning irony of our sophisticated system is the Jim Crow aristocracy which our AMA colleges have helped to produce. These are the court eunuchs of our time. They are carefully bred, cultured individuals who have been deprived of their birthright and thereby emasculated intellectually, so that they are content to serve in the high chambers of our society, convinced that they have risen above color and segregation because they have the economic wherewithal to insulate themselves from direct encounter with the system. The lives of their children are daily destroyed emotionally and spiritually by this illusion. This is one reason it is hard for Negroes to accumulate and pass on wealth or culture from generation to generation; the original achievement is itself a myth which can survive only as it is supported by some patron in the white community. Unless those of the younger generation can remain in the good graces of the patron, the bubble is burst. This is slavery—refined, genteel, but also iron-clad in its determination to maintain itself and capable of any degree of savagery to do so.

The system the Negro faces

This is the system which the Negro faces in the United States, both North and South. He is deprived educationally, exploited economically, humiliated in his personal attempts to gain the respect accorded other human beings, disfranchised politically—

through every means from careful districting and gerrymandering in the North to literacy tests, poll tax, and even murder in the South—the courts are costly and slow and he is poor and impatient in his slave existence. When a man realizes the nature of his condition, and when he comes to some awareness of himself as God's child, he can no longer remain a passive uncommitted creature; he demonstrates. The demonstration may be as simple as the slave songs which affirmed their humanity "in spite of," and looked forward to a better day "beyond the Jordan," or it may take the form of open violence in behalf of personal freedom as in the Boston Tea Party. Whichever form it takes, implicit in it is the affirmation: "Before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free."

Almost any act which is engaged in by two or more persons is considered a demonstration when it is conducted within a slave state. In Birmingham the first eight persons who decided that they were God's children and that God's children had no business going through back doors constituted a demonstration when they entered a restaurant through the front door. There was no sign; officially they were breaking no law; their arrest was not ordered by the management. They broke a tradition of segregation, and Alabama police enforce their traditions much more strenuously than they do their laws.

Right to protest for redress of grievances

Now the Constitution of the United States was written by men whose memories, seared by the injustices of European totalitarianism, recognized the necessity of the continued pursuit of freedom; so the very first amendment to our Constitution guarantees the right to peaceful protest for redress of grievances. To keep the record clear, we should recall that the massive demonstration called the Freedom Rides occurred almost ten years after the Supreme Court, the only one of our democratic institutions to have successfully escaped domination by the slave system, had declared that segregation in inter-state travel was unconstitutional. The arrest of some 1,200 citizens of Albany, Georgia, occurred several months after an additional ruling by the Inter-State Commerce Commission reinforced the court opinion. But local ordinances ignored these federal decisions, and would have continued to do so had they not been challenged

by thousands of Negro citizens. The fact is, the federal courts have little or no power to enforce their orders unless there is cooperation from local and state police authorities. In the South, especially, this just does not exist.

What we have just attempted to describe is the structuralization of "sin" in our society. On the level of individual involvement we readily recognize the relationship between prejudice and sin. When an entire community of sinners get together and organize to perpetuate and insure their sin, we are presented with a Christian dilemma which we can no longer meet with the present modes of Christian witness. However, if we go further back into the church's life we will recall many periods of persecution in the life of the church when one's only readily available form of witness was the presentation of one's body in protest. It is in this tradition that our present demonstrations stand.

War against principalities and powers

In my first experience as a Southern pastor I learned of the folly of the "personal" approach to the question of salvation. While it may always be possible to enjoy a new life in Christ in any earthly circumstance, Negroes in Southwest Georgia were so conditioned by the slave society which surrounded them and the pietist ethos of the area that any realistic proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ had to prepare the Christian to go to war against the principalities and powers of the social order which so insidiously worked against the very humanity of the believer. Bonhoeffer's words were never more applicable than in this situation: "When Jesus Christ calls a man he bids him come and die." Christian discipleship on any terms other than these in this environment was a farce, for to act like God's child could very easily have cost a man his life, so determined were those in power to maintain an inferior status for black men.

The first order of the Christian when confronted by institutionalized evil such as one finds here is thoroughly to investigate and understand it. This has been our weakness, perhaps. It is much easier to accept the superficial view of life than to plunge into the depths of its evil. This is where we betray our faith. We don't let God lead us into any demanding situations. When we do he usually opens to us a course of action.

Once Negroes became secure enough in the pursuit of their daily bread to turn to the questions of the soul, they realized they were in a trap, a concentration camp no less. Without fully appreciating the extent of the trap nor the large-scale mechanism which maintained it, they began to attack the symptoms of injustice, merely by refusing to cooperate with them any longer. This was the nature of the Montgomery Bus Protest. Negroes did nothing except band together and refuse to cooperate with the evils of bus segregation. This is the simplest form of demonstration, and yet it is one of the most powerful. If our churches would just refuse to cooperate with evil in their institutional hierarchies. If they would refuse to have their monies, God's money, spent in any manner which discriminates against God's children. But let us remember, we have already refused to face the demonic long enough for us to understand its nature. Then, too, if it took Negroes *en masse* almost a hundred years to realize they were enslaved, it might take the church a little longer to recognize its complicity in the slave system.

"Soul force"

The success of the Montgomery Protest taught Negroes the power which is resident in the human soul. They were introduced to "soul force." They learned that jail could be a place of Christian refuge, for when a man is jailed for doing what is right his body in jail is a powerful witness against the evil which placed him there.

Having learned of the power of the human soul, students began aggressively to challenge the inconsistencies in our democracy. These challenges brought forth all of the subterranean hatred which is present in the slave system, and America began to exorcise the demons of prejudice. As Martin Luther King, Jr. says, "segregation is like a sore, and it must be opened to the light that it may be purged of impurities and thereby healed." This is the second stage of demonstrations.

God is at work

The suffering of innocent students, Christians, willingly volunteering themselves as living sacrifices was as powerful a witness in America as was Stephen's martyrdom to Paul, for the men and women of good will began to rally and, for the first time in many years, America began the search for national

salvation. The separation of her citizens evidenced her separation from God, and the sickness of her soul spewed forth the world over, via Telstar. This was perhaps the most powerful Christian witness ever made—in magnitude if not in depth. God is certainly at work in this crisis leading men out of their own hatred.

The fruits of this witness seem forthcoming, for once faced with the problem in such an inescapable way the Congress of the United States began to draft legislation which might provide for the healing of the body politic. Social science has indicated that behavior changes soon result in attitudinal changes, so our government began the amendment of our codes to regulate inhuman behavior against fellow human beings.

A new mode of evangelism

This should be recognized as a new mode of evangelism. We began to see the relationship when so many people, young and old, found new faith and meaning in jail with their pastors. Certainly such public attempts to “break down the dividing wall of hostility” must be celebrated as the work of Christ in the world.

Sin in high places is definitely the problem of the church in an essentially urban culture. The difficulties of our society are so pressing that normal patterns of reform are ineffective. Negroes faced with the threat of automation are not apt to be patient with inadequate education which is not preparing them for an automated society; and so, demonstrations will become more and more dramatic. They will take diverse forms, but in each there will be a cry against injustice. The demonstrations themselves will not always be as neat and dignified as college students reading Shakespeare at lunch counters, but the message will be the same, “Things are not right.”

Confronted, will we hear the message?

Rome, at the height of her moment of greatness, found herself challenged by inequities within her midst. Christians then demonstrated at the stakes of the Colosseum, singing hymns as they burned, but Rome could not hear their message. Now America is confronted with many of the same problems with the added advantage of having them dressed in black and demonstrated aggressively by millions. The evils against which

they demonstrate are not their problems. These are America's problems. Schools would be a problem for twentieth century America even if no Negroes existed, and so would jobs. Regional concentrations of political power, whether they resulted from racial discrimination or changing rural-urban population ratios would make government ineffective in times like these. The Ku Klux Klan is not a result of race hatred, but of the fact that America has never shared her vision of democracy with the poor and insecure working classes; nor has the church witnessed to the fact that all are one in Christ Jesus.

We should thank God daily for demonstrations, and we should encourage, plan, and participate in them whenever possible. They may very well be the witness through which God reveals the course of history.

