

THE FUTURE OUTLOOK

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Pastor Says, "Tension Aroused By Church"

Reprinted from Greensboro Daily News 4/20/70

By Harvey Harris, Daily News Staff Writer

The only Negro pastor chosen as a Western North Carolina Methodist Conference delegate to a special meeting of America's Methodists in St. Louis believes fears of disturbances there are being aroused by some churchmen who are unwilling to deal with their failures.

"It may be that the tension with which we approach this conference has been aroused more by ourselves and our failure to minister to people we call outsiders and their legitimate grievances," said the Rev. Joseph B. Bethea.

The pastor of St. Matthews United Methodist Church in Greensboro reported in an interview at the Daily News offices, "I'm sure the conference will hear from, in addition to official legislative bodies and special commissions, some other folks."

Groups he expects there include Black Methodists for Church Revival and the Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC), the Black Manifesto organization.

"The logical way to deal with problems in St. Louis," said Bethea, "is to listen, really listen, and respond in keeping with who we are and what we are — the Christian Church."

He advocates a positive approach, without fear, admitting that this conference will "probably be the parting of the ways for many people who disagree as to what that response should be."

Bishop Earl G. Hunt, Jr. of Charlotte in a pastoral letter to WNC Conference clergy, said, "Many have feared that the General Conference may experience interruptions and actual invasions by militant pressure groups."

The Bishop told his pastors "the Church is obligated to hear what that type of individual or group may feel compelled to say, but the Church is also equally obligated to analyze what it has heard and to formulate responses that take into consideration both the problems of our day and the proper conservation of the institutional Church and its prophetic witness in the world."

The General Conference in session Monday-Friday in Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis is slated to face problems of civil disobedience, segregation in schools and churches, church union and church renewal.

This is the first national convention of the United Methodist Church, born in 1968 from union of Methodist and United Brethren Churches, that lost members and gained in finances since the Dallas, Tex., meeting brought it into existence.

Betha is among many feeling that the former procedure of having General Conferences every four years "is unwise" because "times are moving too fast, too many events are taking place and things are changing too rapidly" to wait that long between national sessions of the Church.

The Greensboro pastor explained that the 1968 General Conference arranged the upcoming week's sessions so the Church "could investigate its progress toward inclusiveness and church union."

Betha expects positive action from The Report On Religion and Race because "we still have some segregated conferences in the United Methodist Church." He also wants to get deeper insights into "what has been accomplished in two years of church union, and prospects for its future."

The only other Negro among the WNC Conference's 24 delegates is a Greensboro layman, Clarence T. Winchester, a member of Betha's church. There are a number of Negro alternate delegates, including the Rev. William T. Brown of Greensboro.

This Week's Sunday School Lesson

SCATTERED TO WITNESS BEGINNING WHERE YOU ARE

Suppose someone in your community were advocating views and ideas you consider subversive. What should you do about it? What should you expect your church to do? This is no hypothetical question, for all over the land today people are proposing social and political reforms and new styles of personal life that others find frightening and dangerous.

In this kind of situation many remedies are proposed. Some would censor speech and publications. Others want stricter law enforcement against "disturbers of the peace." Occasionally groups may try to frighten unwelcome people into moving out of the community.

In the early days of Christianity the leaders of the Jewish community believed that the new faith was endangering the peace and stability of the community. We have already seen that the authorities had warned Peter and John to be silent. However, the apostles persisted in public teaching, and more persons were accepting the new doctrines.

As long as these new views were confined to a small group of Galilean pilgrims, the rules were prepared to be tolerant. But now that the movement was growing in strength in Jerusalem, it seemed time to act. As we shall see, the repression by the authorities produced the opposite effect from that intended. When we are tempted to try to silence those whose views we dislike, we might profitably reflect upon what happened in Judea long ago.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

The Scripture for this lesson is Acts 6:8 through 8:40; 10:1 through 11:18. Selected verses are printed below.

Acts 8:1b-5
 1b And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. 3 But Saul laid waste the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

4 Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. 5 Philip went down to a city of Samaria, and proclaimed to them the Christ. Acts 11:11-18

11 "At that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. 12 And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brethren also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 And he told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon called Peter; 14 he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' 15 As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how

he said, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" 18 When they heard this they were silenced. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life."

Memory Selection: We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard. —Acts 4:20

EXPLORING THE QUESTIONS

As you read the passages assigned for study this week (Acts 6:8 through 8:40 and 10:1 through 11:18), you will note that the story of Jesus and his salvation was being told in ever-widening circles.

First, we read of Stephen and his teaching. Stephen, a Greek-speaking Jew, was one of those who had been chosen to care for the distribution of alms. (Acts 6:1-6) But he did more than this. He taught so persuasively in one of the synagogues that the conservative members of the synagogue were unable to cope with his arguments. They therefore brought him to the council and produced false witnesses against him. When he was allowed to speak in his own defense, he condemned the nation so effectively that the people were infuriated and stoned him to death. (Acts 6:8 through 8:1a)

The death of the church's first martyr was followed by persecution of known Christians in Jerusalem, led by the young man Saul. The apostles apparently had enough prestige and respect in the city that they could remain. Many others, however, fled to escape possible persecution. (Acts 8:1b-3)

Those who escaped took the good news with them. Among these was Philip, not the disciple but the man named Stephen in Acts 6:5. Philip preached with great success to the Samaritans, to the Ethiopian official on the road to Gaza, and to the people of the towns between Azotus and Caesarea. (Acts 8:4-14) Thus persecution actually spread the new faith.

The last incident in our lesson tells of a gentile convert, Cornelius. His is one of the most familiar stories in Acts. (Acts 10:1 through 11:18)

These three incidents — the martyrdom of Stephen, the preaching of Philip, and the conversion of Cornelius — raise many interesting and important questions.

Is it always necessary to stand up for and speak out one's convictions, even at the risk of personal danger?

Is speech the only way to witness? What are some examples of a Christian witness through deeds?

What sort of witness for Christ might bring trouble to a person in our day? Does it always advance a cause to make martyrs of its adherents? If so, why? What lesson can we learn for dealing with unpopular minority movements today?

What barriers today are comparable to Jewish-Samaritan hostility in New Testament

times? Do you know any cases where Christian love has overcome such hostility?

Why did the Jerusalem Christians object to Peter's mission to Cornelius? Why did they later object to Paul's gentile converts? What is today's equivalent of the Jewish-gentile controversy?

FINDING HELP WITH YOUR QUESTIONS

Having surveyed this section of Acts as a whole and having noted the pattern of expansion it reveals, let us examine each incident in more detail to see what it can tell us about our own situation.

The Church's First Martyr

We begin with Stephen. We are told nothing about him except that he was a leader among the Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem, but we can infer much more. He seems to have been the first to take Christian teaching to the synagogue, the center for Jewish reading and study of the Scriptures. Further, the synagogue where he taught was frequented by Jews who had lived in Greek sections of the empire. In preaching to them Stephen revealed an early understanding that the new faith had worldwide horizons, and was not tied to its Jewish heritage.

As we read Stephen's speech of defense, we can feel the power of a first-class mind. Stephen saw the bearing of history upon the present, and he was able to organize his ideas clearly and forcefully. In him the new faith had an able and brilliant defender.

We can find many parallels between the trial of Stephen and that of Jesus. False witnesses charged each of them with blasphemy. Each was tried by the Sanhedrin. Stephen, like Jesus, asked forgiveness for his executioners. Jesus commended his spirit to the Father; Stephen, to the "Lord Jesus."

In at least one respect, Jesus and Stephen differed. Jesus did not defend himself before Pilate, but Stephen made a strong attack on the Jewish leaders.

What do the life and death of Stephen say to us?

In the first place, his martyrdom exposes the cruelty of good people. Upright, respectable people killed Jesus and Stephen. These leaders felt they were defending their religious and political institutions, but they confused their own power and prestige with the will of God. Could any of us do the same thing?

Second, this story speaks to us of the courage of faithful people. How thrilling that one man would dare stand up to the rulers of the nation! When we hear someone speak the truth boldly, how it clears the air! A newspaper prints an unpopular truth, and businesses cancel their advertising. A lawyer undertakes the defense of a notorious person, and his friends ignore him on the street. A teacher speaks against bigotry and prejudice and is awakened by malicious telephone calls every night. But these individual acts of courage help strengthen the rest of us to stand for the right.

Third, the results of Stephen's death illustrate the creative power

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