

August 14, 1968

A Stand Against Violence

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the personal story of a Baptist pastor in Meridian, Miss., who dared risk both life and pulpit--and may lose the latter--because he cried out against the burning of seven Negro churches in four months. The Committee of Conscience he heads has raised more than \$10,000 in cash and an additional \$10,000 in pledges, labor, and materials for replacing the burned churches. O'Chester, pastor of Poplar Springs Drive Baptist Church in Meridian, said his ministry has become extremely difficult in recent days with pressure mounting for removal from the pastorate he has held for five years.

By Harold E. O'Chester

Easter morning in my city of Meridian, Miss., was darkened by the smoke of the seventh Negro church burning in four months. "My Lord," I asked, "Why? What possible good can come from this?"

As on many other occasions in my 15-year ministry in Mississippi, my conscience was pricked. I had always been proud that I proclaimed the "whole gospel." I knew as God's man I had been commanded to preach not a partial, popular gospel, palatable to all, but the prophetic gospel which cuts like a two-edged sword to convict and convert us to commitment to our Lord.

I had for the most part joined with my predecessors in the 85-year history of our church in saying that racial issues are no concern for the church. But in doing so, I departed from the biblical, historical, and theological positions as well as from the mandates of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

From the blackness of that Easter came resolve to take a stand. I felt that it would cost me my church and so told my wife. She, as I knew she would, told me to do whatever I felt the Lord wanted and leave the rest to God.

I said in our church bulletin, "Apparently, some southern patriot has put the torch to another house of worship in the Meridian area. He must feel real proud of himself. It surely took intestinal fortitude to douse a darkened church building with gasoline on Easter morning and set it afire."

I had faced myself and I didn't like what I saw. I decided to try to solve the problems because of what they were doing to our Christian witness.

On Monday I presented a resolution which was adopted by the Lauderdale County Baptist Pastors Conference deploring the violence and requesting the State Committee of Concern to do the work of rebuilding. The Mississippi Baptist worker with Negroes wisely urged us to do it ourselves.

The Chamber of Commerce was contacted, and 29 religious, business, and civic leaders were invited to decide on a course of action. I thought I would nominate the pastor of the First Baptist Church (thereby getting myself off the hook) because of his prominence in the community. The men would have none of it and elected me chairman of the Committee of Conscience. I knew my pastoral goose was cooked.

We organized for action. Our first decision was to issue a statement deploring the violence and pledging to restore all churches burned by arsonists. We printed a brochure telling of our work and made plans for a Day of Restoration. We moved so fast and so far the first week that it took time to realize we were the first bi-racial committee in Lauderdale County without either outside pressure or inside bickering wrecking the group.

Some local pastors, Baptist and others, were instructed by their official boards not to mention the committee in the church or to take an offering. Three Southern Baptist preachers, including the pastor of the First Baptist Church and another leading pastor as well as the county missionary, immediately joined the committee. Ultimately the count swelled to 14 Southern Baptist pastors. Participation for some was heroic. They came from rural churches where the white knights of the Klan are the most numerous.

Our tensions were not over. Another Negro church was burned in the heart of Meridian. This served to crystallize our position and make us more vocal. The local rabbi and several prominent Jewish citizens joined the committee.

Night riders bombed the beautiful new Jewish Temple, causing \$250,000 damage. This brought the indignation of all responsible citizens.

Two weeks after the formation of the committee, the police informed me that I had been placed on a list for violent action. I received threatening telephone calls.

My children were moved from the front of the house to the back den and slept on the floor until we moved their beds. I had revival meetings canceled because of my stand--yet through it all, my people supported me and were outraged that this was happening to their pastor.

Not all felt this way. One member nearly choked, I am told, when the local NAACP president, also co-chairman of our committee, called me by my first name on a television program while publicizing the Day of Restoration.

This did not diminish my love for them. They were the products of 85 years of preaching and leadership in our church where no one dared to face the reality of a "whosoever" gospel. This is a church that once received Klan members in their robes for worship. The Klan had also made contributions through our church in the 1920's.

The final chapter, we hope, in the pattern of violence was recorded in July when those of us on the infamous list were alerted to the possibility of "something big" happening. Policemen and FBI agents were staked out when a night bomber responsible for more than five other bombings, carried a 29-stick dynamite device to the home of a Jewish member of our committee.

The police in a blaze of gunplay killed one and captured another.

Nearly 400 people of both races went in July to the site of the burned Mount Pleasant Baptist Church to break ground for a new building.

The day is coming, and perhaps soon, when the people of my church, because of its location, will have to face the reality of a gospel with "whosoever hinges" on the doors that swing open to whosoever will come. That day has not arrived, but I feel that the openness and honesty with which the members faced a moment of truth in their own lives makes that day much closer.

Several weeks ago, I gave an invitation to our congregation to "commit your lives to the development of a greater awareness of the responsibilities of Christian citizenship."

I said: "We're going to have to pay the price if we are going to see the attitude of hate and violence changed in our community. We will either pay the price in love or blood. Let us commit ourselves to reduce the estrangement that now exists. Let us cross the artificial barriers established by society.

"I therefore invite you as God's spokesman to get your heads out of the ground and face our individual duties with reference to the issues and publicly commit yourselves to a ministry of reconciliation and love demonstrated by our Savior."

At that invitation 93 adults came forward out of a congregation of 550.

A new day is dawning in Mississippi, but there is still much work to do.



BAPTIST PRESS

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

460 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, Tennessee 37219
Telephone (615) 244-2355
W. C. Fields, Director
Jim Newton, Assistant Director

REGIONAL OFFICES

ATLANTA Walker L. Knight, Editor, 161 Spring Street, N.W., Atlanta, Georgia 30303, Telephone (404) 523-2593

DALLAS Editor, 103 Baptist Building, Dallas, Texas 75201, Telephone (214) RI 1-1996

WASHINGTON W. Barry Garrett, Editor, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

BUREAU

BAPTIST SUNDAY SCHOOL BOARD Lynn M. Davis Jr., Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37203,
Telephone (615) 254-1631

August 14, 1968

Negro To Play Christ In Atlanta Drama

ATLANTA (BP)--Christian and secular forces are joining here to produce a mammoth drama on the life of Christ that will feature 500 Negroes and whites cast as biblical characters, and a Negro Baptist preacher in the role of Christ.

The play, scheduled Sept. 15 for the 50,000-capacity Atlanta Stadium, is perhaps the largest production on Christ ever attempted and the first time a major religious pageant has featured a black Christ, the drama's officials said.

Jesus' 12 disciples will be portrayed by Negroes, caucasians, an oriental and an Indian.

The roles of Mary, the mother of Christ, and Judas Iscariot, the betrayer, also are to be played by local Negro actors. The remainder of the cast is almost evenly half Negro, half white.

The \$70,000 production has been underwritten by Atlanta businessmen. It is sponsored by the Christian Council of Metropolitan Atlanta (representing about 250 churches), other churches (including Baptist), the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce and the city of Atlanta.

"Aim of the drama is to give visible testimony to a feeling of unity, to the fact that all kinds of people can be brought together to help reveal Christ to men," said Paul Aiken, former Atlanta pastor on temporary assignment with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in Atlanta.

Aiken has worked with the production committee in cultivating the interest and participation of local churches and pastors conferences.

Reflecting the objective of the play, extras in the cast of 500 have been recruited from inner-city, low-income areas. Choirs from many different churches will comprise the 2,000-voice choir that is to accompany the cast.

After a coast-to-coast search for the right actor, William Holmes Borders, pastor of Atlanta's Hugh Wheate Street Baptist Church, was given the role of Christ.

According to director Frank Roughton, the role had to be filled by a man who was "dedicated, talented, well-educated and theologically knowledgeable--preferably a minister."

After seeing Borders at a news conference where he appeared in robes and makeup--including a Greek nose job--an Atlanta Constitution reporter wrote "He looked amazingly like Christ has been pictured."

Borders, whose inner-city church has launched into low-income housing, a credit union and other self-help ministries, is one of the most respected Negro leaders in Atlanta.

The production committee, composed of ministers and laymen from several denominations, are hoping to overrun the 50,000-capacity stadium with the "positive demonstration of brotherhood." Churches, clubs and businesses are selling tickets, priced from \$1 to \$5.

The city has granted use of the stadium free. If proceeds exceed the costs, the Atlanta Christian Council will direct use of the funds.

-30-

Morgan Named To Texas
School PR Position

8/14/68

COLLEGE STATION, Tex. (BP)--Al Morgan, staff associate in the public relations department for the Baptist General Convention of Texas in Dallas, has been named special projects editor of the department of information and publications at Texas A & M University here.

Morgan, press representative for the Texas Baptist organization for the past two years will assume the new duties, working under A & M Director of Information and Publications Jim Lindsey, a Baptist, effective Sept. 1.

-MORGAN-

A former staff writer and publications editor for the Dallas Morning News and later city editor for the Daily News in Whittier, Calif., near Los Angeles, Morgan won seven awards in state and national Baptist Public Relations Association competition this year.

A native of Dallas, Morgan, 34, received his education at Dallas Bible College, Dallas College of Southern Methodist University, and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is also a graduate of the Armed Forces Information School in New York.

-30-

Boys Told Parents' Needed
On Problems Like Watts Riots

8/14/68

OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)--Southern Baptist boys were told here that their parents need to get involved in important problems such as racial turmoil in Watts.

Addressing boys ages 15 to 17 attending the Southern Baptist National Royal Ambassador Congress, Glendon McCullough, who helps select home missionaries for Southern Baptists, told the youths they also need to get involved in the cutting edge of the needs of the world.

Baptists have been slow in becoming involved in the areas where the greatest contributions can be made, he said.

"The greatest contribution in Watts and other riot areas should be made by Baptists, not community development programs," McCullough said. "Unfortunately, a lot of Baptist churches are just pretending they are in the game."

McCullough, personnel secretary for the SBC Home Mission Board in Atlanta, shared the platform with Jesse Fletcher of Richmond, Va., who helps select missionaries to serve in foreign countries.

The missionary of the future will need to be multi-lingual, highly mobile and possess an increasing number of skills, said Fletcher, a representative of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

The three-day national missions conference featured missionaries during the second day. About 16 were on hand, many in native costume, to share information with the 9,500 boys ages 9 to 17 about the unusual customs of the countries and the minority groups they serve.

Carlos R. Owen of Kigoma, Tanzania, identified witchcraft as the most pressing obstacle to missions in East Africa.

"People can actually die when an 'evil spirit' is cast upon them. It's because they believe so strongly in the power of evil spirits," he said.

Owen told of traveling from church to church on the banks of Lake Tanganyika in a motor boat given him by Royal Ambassadors from Tennessee.

Missionary Dewey Merritt recalled how he shot off the arm of a Nigerian boy and later led the boy to accept the Christian faith.

The incident occurred while the two were hunting wild pigs in the bush country. During the recovery period, the boy became the only Christian in his village, Merritt said.

Loyd Corder, ~~associate missions director~~ ^{missions director} for the Home Mission Board, used ventriloquism to strike at prejudice because of race, color, language or dress. His aid was a wooden figure he identified as "Joe, the Baptist."

The boys devoted much of the day to tours in the Oklahoma City area in working up appetites for 2,500 pounds of beef.

The boys also attended a missionary autograph party, saw a fielding demonstration by Don Demeter of Oklahoma City, a former major league baseball player, and viewed a shooting demonstration by Sunset "Kit" Carson of Anadiko, Okla., a professional sharpshooter.

An address by Dr. Robert Hingson, a Cleveland anesthesiologist and Baptist layman who leads medical mission teams to foreign countries to inoculate the poor, featured the second night session.

Major William Pogue of Houston, Tex., a Southern Baptist astronaut talked to the boys by telephone.

The Congress, sponsored by the Brotherhood Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, closed with a rodeo and an address by Bruce Oliver, missionary to Brazil.

Royal Ambassadors, a missionary education organization for Southern Baptist boys, has chapters in more than 10,000 churches in the United States and several foreign countries.



BAPTIST PRESS

*460 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, Tennessee 37219*

DAVIS C. WOOLLEY HQ
HISTORICAL COMMISSION
121 NINTH AVE. N.
NASHVILLE, TENN. 37203

RECEIVED
AUG 15 1968

HISTORICAL COMMISSION, SBC