

*The Church Considers
the
Supreme Court Decision*

THE DIOCESE OF MISSISSIPPI
Department of Christian Social Relations
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THE SUPREME COURT'S DECISION

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States handed down an historic decision in which segregation in the public schools of this land of ours was declared unconstitutional. The decision reached was unanimous. Not one voice of dissent was heard from the nine justices of the highest court in the land—a relatively rare occurrence in recent judicial history, and a very significant one.

In many ways the public schools form the very cornerstone of our great democracy. In order for democracy to work, the people must be educated. They must be prepared for the exercise of honest and intelligent citizenship, and this irrespective of race, creed, or color. Nor must the opportunity for a good education be dependent upon one's economic or social status. Basic to the very theory of public schools is the assumption that one's opportunity for an education is not to be determined by his ability to pay for it, whether in the form of tuition, or in the form of taxes. The poverty-stricken who pay no direct taxes at all are just as much entitled to an education in the public schools as are the sons and daughters of the more fortunate who bear the major part of the tax burden for public institutions. This is a basic premise of Christian democracy. If we find ourselves resenting this, then we should examine our attitude toward democracy itself.

We in the South are most affected by the Supreme Court's decision, although its ramifications are by no means limited to our region. Segre-

gation in one form or another may be found in every state, north and south, so let us not think that we face the problem alone. Nevertheless, the laws on our own southern statute books are specifically those which have been declared unconstitutional, and it is we who face the problem in its most obvious form. What, then, is our reaction to this problem? What can we propose in the way of its solution?

THE ISSUES AT STAKE

Unfortunately, very little constructive thinking has been done thus far on this issue. The situation lends itself easily to political exploitation, and already we have seen too much of this type reaction. It is not those whose voices are most often heard or whose words are most often read who can or will solve the problem which faces us. There is a desperate need for intelligent and consecrated Christian leadership; a need which all sincere Christians should feel obligated to fill. Much has been said about the "political" nature of the Supreme Court's decision. Without attempting to pass judgment upon the validity of this charge and quite apart from any personalities which may be involved, the Church should and must call attention to the moral and religious issues which lie at the heart of the whole question. We would not presume to judge the aims and motives of any particular individual involved in the controversy—that is for God alone to do—but we would be derelict in our duty as Christians if we did not do our best to bring into clear focus the moral and religious issues at stake.

The Supreme Court's decision has to do with human beings. The great ethical principles of the New Testament proclaim the sanctity of the human personality as that which takes precedence over every other human consideration. Man, be he white or black, is made in the image of God. This is fundamental to the Biblical concept of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of Man. Our attitude toward the Supreme Court's decision is, therefore, essentially a religious question, since it concerns what we really believe about God and His creation. It concerns what we believe ourselves to be in relation to God and in relation to other human beings.

Our Constitution and Declaration of Independence reaffirm this Biblical doctrine of the dignity and worth of the individual by listing certain inalienable rights with which every human being is endowed by his Creator. "Among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The basic question we must face, therefore, is whether the practice of segregation in the public schools hinders or helps the full enjoyment of these rights. To face up to this question honestly and sincerely as Christians and as citizens of a democracy, we must be fully aware of the conditions which exist and have existed under our segregated system. Whatever may be said for the doctrine of "separate but equal" in theory, we must all admit that in practice facilities have always been separate but almost never equal. We must understand the place of public education in the life of America today, and we must make an intelligent study of the psychological effects of segregation on both races.

These effects are neither irrelevant nor unimportant. Indeed, they may lie at the very heart of the question of human rights with which we are faced. Above all else, we must be willing to listen to the words of our Lord Himself when He speaks of our relationship to our fellow men. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Matt. 22:39). "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets." (Matt. 7:12).

The Christian must be firm in his conviction that all men are created equal in principle. This is basic to Christianity and also to the democratic form of government under which we live. There can be no compromise with this principle. The value of Man is a value which he derives from God, and it is shared by all men. Inasmuch as this is a gift from God, no man has jurisdiction over this value. It may not be denied to another without losing it oneself. We are all members of one Body. We are all children of God, brothers one of another.

This unity which exists among all human beings is most evident in God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ. As St. Paul sees with unerring instinct, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28). When God became Man in Jesus Christ, He did not become just a man, but man in general as well. In Christ universal humanity has been brought into intimate union with God, and in this fact lies our hope of salvation. Our Lord himself calls attention to His essential oneness with all

human beings in those well-known words, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matt. 25:40). The fact of the Incarnation presses hard upon us the necessity for looking at each man, irrespective of race or color, and understanding that Christ died for *him*: that this man is in reality one whom God has made in love, and one who can know no peace except in loving God in return. This man, whatever his color, is the object of a divine love so great that the Word became flesh for his salvation. If this is what this man is in the eyes of God, who is Man to declare otherwise? This is God's creation; we are his creatures, white and black, yellow and red. We share a common destiny and a common end in life. We have a common Creator, and our value derives from Him. We dare not declare one group inherently superior to another when God Himself does not. We are not the Creator.

Thus, from the standpoint of Christian principle, we cannot believe that the Supreme Court's decision was anything but just and right. In our Christian faith, as well as in our political creed, we are committed to the principle of the equality of all men before God and before the law. How, then, could we have expected any other verdict from the highest court of a professedly Christian and democratic country? It was in the light of such considerations as these that our Provincial Department of Christian Social Relations, meeting in Atlanta on May 18, 1954, and representing the Episcopal dioceses of the Southeast from Louisiana to North Carolina, declared that "the decision

of the Supreme Court outlawing segregation in the public schools is just and right." It is also significant that the Southern Baptists and the Southern Presbyterians, who speak for Southerners and to Southerners, have recently declared in their annual conventions that they agree in principle with the Court's decision.

THE PROBLEM OF APPLICATION

We recognize, however, that there is a wide gap between the proclamation of such a principle and its practical application. The Court's decision poses gigantic problems for the people of the South. Customs and traditions of such long standing are not overthrown overnight, and we face a period of transition which could be difficult for both races. Fortunately, however, the Supreme Court seems to recognize this fact. We think the Court has shown great wisdom in requesting time and further testimony from the southern states themselves before any decree is issued for implementing the decision. The Court would like to depend as much as possible upon local initiative for the proper solution of all the problems involved. For this we may all be thankful.

Christian principles are not always easy to face. We still live in a sinful world. We still remain more self-centered than God-centered. Such a situation encourages the suppression of Christian principle, for, after all, the Christian goal is one of perfection, and perfection is seldom practical in an imperfect society. Life is often easier for most of us if questions of Christian principle are never

raised. We recognize this fact. Yet when such a question is raised, there can be only one answer for the true Christian. The truth is often hard to take; a bitter pill, a harsh prescription. Yet in the long run the truth will never hurt us. This must be the conviction of any follower of that road which led to the Cross. As bitter as the pill may be; as difficult as the task may appear; the only enduring foundation for the kingdom of God and a strong democracy as well is the truth as we have received it in Jesus Christ, "come whence it may, cost what it will."

It is with this deep conviction that the Church urges you to examine the current problem from the standpoint of the Christian faith and the will of God. "The right relation among races, as among nations, will never come by law alone. It will not come until millions of men of all races look with wondering tenderness upon their fellow men who, in spite of human sin and shame, still bear the divine stamp upon their souls." We believe that you can become the center of a group which will work constructively toward a solution of this problem from within the decision of the Supreme Court. The people who are really involved in this situation are those of us who live in small southern communities, whose children attend school, who meet our neighbors along the streets, and who, for the most part, worship God in His Church. It is we who have to search our hearts, pray for grace and wisdom, and learn to live within the Court's decision.

Many difficult problems remain ahead of us. No one would pretend to know what the final an-

swers are. Yet those to whom this statement is addressed are those who, by and large, have done so much in the past to promote harmony and understanding between the races in our beloved Southland. Sincere and dedicated Churchmen, white and Negro alike, here in the Diocese of Mississippi have furnished consecrated leadership time and time again in the field of race relations, and we know that great strides have been made in this field in recent years. It is to these same persons that this new call for Christian leadership is addressed. We feel confident that the Episcopal Church in Mississippi will live up to this new challenge in a manner befitting her record in the past.

WHAT WE CAN DO

As we proceed along the path of implementing the Court's decision, there would seem to be certain broad policies which Christian Churchmen would want to follow. We would suggest but a few of these here.

1) In the first place, we must recognize the responsibility incumbent upon *both* races for a Christian solution to our problem. Regardless of initial responsibility, there exists today a situation in which each race rejects the other. This barrier of mutual antagonism and distrust must be pulled down from both sides before anything approaching a Christian answer can be found.

2) With this mutual obligation in mind, white people must not assume that they alone are concerned with a peaceful solution to the prob-

lem we face. Nor must they assume that they alone have the wisdom to work toward that solution. Negro leaders who are truly representative of their people should and must be called into the councils of those who seek an answer to our difficulties. This involves more than just a moral responsibility. In a situation which requires of us all the patience and forbearance we can muster, white people might learn much from the native patience and ancient peace of their Negro brethren. In any event, it would seem the height of presumption for those who have local power and responsibility to solve this question to fail to call upon the counsel of the local Negro leaders at every level of administration.

3) Those of us who are parents have the opportunity to render a particularly valuable service. We can do all in our power to see that our children grow up free from prejudice and ill-will toward members of the other race. Prejudices are acquired; we are not born with them. We who are parents should keep this in mind as we try to bring up our children in an atmosphere of Christian love and truth.

4) Finally, the Episcopal Church as a body can give valuable leadership by making certain that all her services of worship are open to any Churchman who wishes to attend, without regard for his race or color. The responsibility for this type leadership lies primarily with each parish and mission. In principle, the doors of our Episcopal churches have always been open to any person who wants to join in our common worship of

Almighty God. In practice, this has not always been true. Now, however, we have come to the point where principle and practice should coincide. For over fifty years we have worshipped and met together on the diocesan level. Let us pray that we may soon be able to say the same of the parish and the mission.

We recognize that in some communities where the number of Negro Episcopalians is relatively large, there may be a desire on the part of both races for separate congregations. Certainly, an arbitrary merger of such congregations would be unnecessary and unwise, provided, of course, that the two remain in close contact with one another as is in keeping with the spirit of brotherhood which should exist between them. But the door of every Episcopal parish and mission should be open to any Churchman who wishes to worship therein. The bishops of the Anglican Communion in the resolutions of the Lambeth Conference of 1930 set forth the position of our communion on this subject in these words: "The Conference affirms its conviction that all communicants without distinction of race or color should have access in any church to the Holy Table of the Lord, and that no one should be excluded from worship in any church on account of color or race. Further, it urges that where, owing to diversity of language or custom, Christians of different races normally worship apart, special occasion should be sought for united services and corporate communion in order to witness to the unity of the Body of Christ."

These are some of the broad policies which Episcopalians and all other sincere Christians can

follow in an effort to solve the difficult problems which beset us at the moment. Let us hope that we will do these things and many more as true disciples of Christ. We affirm once more that we do not underestimate the herculean task that confronts us. We are truly living in a time of crisis; a time of judgment; and such times are always painful and difficult. Yet it is in such times that history is made. It is in such times that the truly great advances are made on the road that leads to the kingdom of God. Inherent in every crisis is the element of opportunity, as well as that of danger. In spite of the dangers which the Court's decision may present, the opportunity it affords is far more important. This event can mark the gateway to a new era in human relationships. It can be the beginning of a long stride toward the consummation of Christ's ideal of brotherhood among all men everywhere. We who live in this age may see very little of that consummation, for it is our lot to live with the crisis, not after it. Yet our faith and hope are not dimmed. We know that we have it within our power, by the grace of God, to hand down to subsequent generations a new concept of race relationships. The message of the Cross is ever before us. The pain and the suffering of Calvary precede the glorious victory of Easter morning, and in the light of the Resurrection, Calvary itself is a glorious victory.

Times of crisis are times for greatness. Man is at his best—or at his worst—under such conditions. Crisis builds character and makes men, but it can also destroy the fearful and the faint of heart. Our job is to make the decision for great-

ness at this moment in history and pray to God that He may give us the strength to be faithful to His will. We in the South have had the opportunity for greatness thrust upon us; we did not ask for it; we may not like it; but we can be thankful for the God-given opportunity to make a significant contribution to the history of our state, our nation, and the world itself. God grant that we may have the vision and the faith to accept this opportunity as consecrated communicants of Christ's Church and to make of it that which God intends it to be.