Letters from Mississippi -- Church Intolerance

> "We speak now against the day when our Southern people who will resist to the last these inevitable changes in social relations, will, when they have been forced to accept what they at one time might have accepted with dignity and goodwill, will say, 'Why didn't someone tell us this before? Tell us this in time!' "
>
> -- William Faulkner, at the Southern Historical Association in Memphis in 1955

Perhaps the last bastion of segregations was ultimately the churches. The federal government could pressure desegregation on voting and schools and public accommodations, but it couldn't touch churches, and for many in the civil rights movement it seemed like desegregation efforts might best be focused elsewhere. Just one indication of this: of the twenty-eight young Mississippi Methodist ministers who signed the January 1963 "Born of Conviction" statement declaring the equality of the races under God, nineteen were banished from their churches and had to leave the state. Here are a couple of book excerpts describing the kind of things that happened.

Though a handful of ministers spoken out for tolerance before October 1962, the violence on the Ole Miss campus for a wider reaction among white clergy in the state. The earliest and most outspoken critic of the governor was Duncan Gray, director of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Oxford and son of the presiding Bishop of the Mississippi Episcopal diocese. Gray blamed Governor Barnett and other state leaders for creating an atmosphere in which violence was the likely outcome. On the night of September 30, Gray bravely went to the Ole Miss campus, where he scolded the riotous students and attempted to calm the crowd. Afterward, he led a petition drive among Oxford's clergy calling for compliance with desegregation orders. Baptist, Episcopal, Methodist, and Presbyterian ministers in Oxford called on White Mississippians to acknowledge and repent for their passive acceptance of the conditions that lead to violence. An editorial in the *Mississippi Methodist Advocate*, the statewide publication for the Methodist Church, claimed that the churches were to blame for allowing "such a force of hate to build up in our state."

Calls for repentance struck a harsh note for some whites who regretted the violence at Ole Miss yet distanced themselves from its causes. "If all the sin I have to answer for is my part in bringing on what happened here Sunday and Monday, then I relinquish my place to someone more needful of forgiveness that I," wrote John Faulkner, William Faulkner's brother, in the *Saturday Evening Post.* A Presbyterian minister from forest, Albert Freundt, dismissed the need for repentance. He linked to the Oxford ministers with liberal clergy from outside the state "who, under the cloak of religion, have gone around the country to incite strife between the races and disobedience to local laws." Freundt referred to the same passage from the Presbyterian Confession of Faith that G. T. Gillespie had referred to, one that counseled churches "to handle or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical, and…not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the Commonwealth." For him, the question was political, not moral: did the Southern states have the right to carry on practices they had for years believed to be acceptable and in the best interests of their citizenry? "It is not the privilege and duty of Christian pastors to take sides on this issue," he wrote. "And it is surely not the right of a pastor to condemn his

people if they do take sides." It was the federal government and outside agitators, Freundt believed, not white Mississippians, who needed forgiveness for provoking the violence at Ole Miss.

As controversial as the Oxford call for repentance was, it was eclipsed in early January 1963 by the "Born of Conviction" statement, a manifesto signed by twenty-eight white Methodist ministers that stressed the freedom of the pulpit, reaffirmed the Methodist Church's policy against discrimination, and urged the public schools to remain open. The signers were almost all young, recent seminary graduates, who had been horrified by the extremism that no one in Mississippi seemed willing to denounce. The statement received national news coverage and, not surprisingly, was harshly denounced by the state's segregationist hard-liners.

In response, MAMML issued its own "Methodist Declaration of Conscience on Racial Segregation," authored by the Citizens' Council executive and Methodist layman Medford Evans. In March 1963, MAMML held a rally of 450 in Jackson, where speakers described integration as a "crime against God." Evans and John Satterfield, among others, addressed the group. The official Board of Galloway Methodist Church in Jackson, the largest and most of influential Methodist Church in the state, made it clear that the statements of its pastors represented personal opinions, not official church policy (the associate professor at Galloway was one of the twenty-eight signers) and reaffirmed the board's opinion that segregation was not unchristian. But the most tangible backlash against the twenty-eight signers could be found in the growing number of them who were forced from their pulpits, and eventually left the state, nineteen in all. The Mississippi Methodist conference eventually would commission a study to determine why forty-four recent seminary graduates had left Mississippi in a five-year span.

The twenty-eight young ministers, however, were not without their supporters. The *Methodist Advocate*, which published the "Born of Conviction" statement, followed it with a supportive editorial. The *Delta Democrat Times* typified the laudatory reaction from the handful of Mississippi's moderate newspapers, comparing the twenty-eight signers to the early Christian martyrs. But by far the most prominent supporter of the twenty-eight was W. T. Selah, who for eighteen years had served as the head pastor at Galloway Methodist in Jackson. Selah would eventually leave his pulpit in protest over white racists in his church, who put the preservation of segregation ahead of all other principles. He was like a number of other white moderates in Mississippi, whose courageous public stands were driven less by the unambiguous rightness of racial desegregation than by the dangerous excess of reactionary whites. Selah had grown up with racial segregation, and the growth of the Citizens' Council did not concern him initially. In 1956, Selah had participated in a Jackson Citizens' Council meeting, offering the invocation; two years later, his views on school segregation were in line with those of other practical segregationist in Mississippi, such as Oliver Amory, who quoted widely from Selah's public statements regarding school desegregation in an editorial in the *Macomb Enterprise-Journal.* Selah believed that most whites did not want to send their children to school with blacks because of blacks' lower "moral standards," the "fear of sex integration," and "cultural differences" between the races. "The best people of both races abhor interracial marriage and miscegenation," he wrote. He called black cultural inequality "our sin," pointing to low income, "a retarding environment," and the failure of states to provide equal schools.

Selah's decision to leave Galloway was several years in the making. In 1961, Selah spoke against the segregation resolution proposed by the Galloway Church board that instructed church ushers to refuse entry to anyone who in their judgment was interested only in "creating an incident." It was not sinful for whites and blacks to want to worship separately, Selah argued, but the resolution was poor public relations. By the early 1960s, Galloway was the most prominent of the number of white Mississippi churches that civil rights activist targeted to expose the discrepancy between white southerners' Christian beliefs and their support for segregation. If Galloway turned away black worshipers, "we will be playing into their hands," Selah argued. Civil rights protesters "will cry to high heaven that Galloway bars colored people," he said without any hint of irony. "There can be no color bar in a Christian church," Selah made clear, but he maintained the appropriateness of separate churches for the races. "If an Afro-American applied for church membership at Galloway, I would have to tell him that he would feel more comfortable with his own people and that it was his duty to join a colored church and help it."

Selah's moderate stance -- by Mississippi standards -- marked him as the voice of wisdom and calm for other White Mississippians who spoke more openly against white racial orthodoxy. Those who knew Selah personally believe that his public moderation belied a deep sympathy with the protesters. Rabbi Perry Nusbaum of Jackson called Selah "my own personal insurance because I figured I'll always have the argument that if Selah was there seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years, and he could survive, I could probably survive." Tougaloo chaplain Edwin King noted that Selah kept in close contact with civil rights workers who came to his church in protest on Sunday mornings. King estimated that Selah's public statements never matched his private beliefs. But Selah also understood to a fine degree the limits of what he could say and still survive as a public figure in Mississippi in the early 1960s.

Selah's ability to finesse this line between public orthodoxy and private sympathy reached a crisis point by the summer of 1963. On a Sunday morning in early June, seventeen civil rights protesters attempted to enter for white Protestant churches in downtown Jackson, one of which was Selah as Galloway Methodist. After the protesters were turned away, Selah stated, and his associate pastor concurred, that they "could not willingly serve a church that turns any people away." Selah repeated an earlier admonition: "There can be no color bar in a Christian church." Two days later, at the annual conference of the Methodist Church in Memphis, Selah reported that he had abandoned his pulpit at Galloway.

-- *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*; Joseph Crespino (2009); pp. 70-73 <http://www.amazon.com/dp/0814708412>

On an early January day in 1963, an irate townsman stormed into the office of Pisgah Methodist Church near McComb to scold Pastor Bill Lampton: "You've messed yourself up real good, boy!" He announced that church members planned to meet that night to "throw [him] out." The following Saturday, Reverend Lampton awoke to find his car tires slashed. Still intending to conduct worship services the next day, he reconsidered when two sympathetic parishioners brought warnings that an angry mob threatened violence to the church and parsonage. Fearing imminent danger, Lampton removed his family to the safety of his parents' home in Columbia.

Pisgah Methodist Church held no services tha Sunday. Lampton sent for his possessions a few days later and never returned to that pulpit.

Lampton's troubles ensued from the "Born of Conviction" statement that he and twenty-seven other young pastors had placed in the *Mississippi Methodist Advocate*... Though the statement hardly seemed radical to the ministers and they intended it only for the state's Methodist community, secular papers picked up the story, and "Born of Conviction" stirred up a hornet's nest.

The grapevines in Mississippi's secular and religious communities fairly crackled with word of the audacious young clerics, and Methodist congregations unleashed fury on the twenty-eight pastors. A church member stopped by the home of an unsuspecting James Rush, pastor of three rural churches in Neshoba County. Finding the minister absent, he heaped verbal abuse upon Rush's wife, so traumatizing her that she required a hospital stay. A second angry church member sought out Mrs. Rush even in her confinement, and administered yet another tongue lashing. While his wife languished, Reverend Rush tried desperately to fend of a coup at two of his churches, but to no avail. At one, he interrupted a clandestine meeting of board members who shocked him with vicious taunts: "Get him a nigger church; bet his son marries a nigger." When Rush refused to recant the affirmations in "Born of Conviction," the board took a vote -- contrary to the stipulations of Methodist polity -- and fired their pastor then and there.

At the rural Byram Methodist Church near Jackson, angry members demand Pastor James Nicholson's resignation just days after the statement appeared. Nicholson proposed that he and the board work to hold the church together until June, when he could request a new appointment, but the board would have none of him. With his salary suspended and the specter of an empty church looming, Nicholson accepted the futility of further negotiations and stepped down.

The furor over the "Born of Conviction" statement dramatically illustrates the turbulence of Mississippi's Methodist community in the civil rights years. While Baptists preserved a placid exterior that masked their frictions with the SBC, Methodists passed the civil rights years in chronic, debilitating turmoil. The fractiousness that beset Mississippi's Methodist community arose from several sources: the very real prospect of racial integration in Methodism, the greater theological variety among Mississippi Methodists, and many Mississippians' loyalties to an extraordinarily8 diverse national denomination. In a sense, their battles represented one theater in the larger national struggle to redefine the meanings of American Christianity with respect to race relations.

-- *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975*; Carolyn Renée Dupont (2013); p. 127-128 <http://www.amazon.com/dp/0814708412>

[For the complete set of my Mississippi 1964-65 letters, see http://dickatlee.com/issues/mississippi]