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SPIRITUAL EQUALITY IN CHRIST

Delivered By

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PRESENTED TO THE CONFERENCE ON  
"Improving Race Relations In The Churches of Christ"

Hilton Inn  
Atlanta, Georgia  
June 25, 1968  
10:30 A.M.

Greetings, welcome to our fine city, and personal blessings to you who are striving to be brothers by showing concern for vital issues which both challenge and compliment the church by encouraging it to enter the fertile field of vicissitudes of circumstances. The Simpson Street Church of Christ extends its blessings and gratitude to those who initiated the idea of this conference. Atlanta, Georgia is grateful that it has qualified to serve as host city.

While we of the South identify more certainly with the ideas of segregation, the legacies of racism and discrimination, all of us in attendance know firsthand the class components of our social system which endorse and encourage white superiority and take for granted black inferiority.

Though extremely late and definitely too late to allow the church to make the impression God would have had, I welcome both this conference and my chance to speak on it in the hope that we may aid a belated church come forth and encourage a church that has been distinct in wearing Christ's name to perhaps become his true possession.

To allow increased understanding, I want to presently announce some basic tenets to my subsequent statements. I firmly believe in the one church but I do not believe such church is possible among people who accommodate a racist system. It is evident we are in knowledge of what the Lord wills at this juncture but have again found more refuge in the world and its ways than in God and his true redemption. Racial segregation in any form is a sin and any church which favors it allows itself to be victimized by sin. While the church has known what is right, the threat of social and economic reprisals with a tinge of a threat of physical intimidation have steered the church in the direction of hell rather than heaven.

I am to speak on the issue of SPIRITUAL EQUALITY IN CHRIST. It is to our advantage for me to state that man is a whole being and must be approached in such manner. Various subjects or issues dealing with man are but effort on our part to categorize or classify information. Therefore, while I must deal with the whole man, my special emphasis has to do with the spiritual equality and its attainment.

Since Ephesians 2:11-22 is the passage which I have heard quoted rather frequently by both the segregationist and the supposed integrationist on various occasions when right was momentarily having its way in those hearts, I will use it as the pivotal passage for this presentation. That passage reads:

Do not lose sight of the fact that you were born 'gentiles,' known by those whose bodies were circumcised as 'the uncircumcised.' You were without Christ; you were utter strangers to God's chosen community, Israel; and you had no knowledge of, or right to, the promised agreements. You had nothing to look forward to and no God to whom you could turn. But now, through the blood of Christ, you who were once outside the pale are with us inside the circle of God's love in Christ Jesus. For Christ is our living peace. He has made a unity of the conflicting elements of Jew and gentile by

breaking down the barrier which lay between us. By his sacrifice he removed the hostility of the Law, with all its commandments and rules, and made in himself out of the two, Jew and Gentile, one new man, thus producing peace. For he reconciled both to God by the sacrifice of one body on the cross, and by this act made utterly irrelevant the antagonism between them. Then he came and told both you who were far from God and us who were near that the war was over. And it is through him that both of us now can approach the Father in the one Spirit.

So you are no longer outsiders or aliens, but fellow citizens with every other Christian you belong now to the household of God. Firmly beneath you is the foundation, God's messengers and prophets, the actual foundation-stone being Christ Jesus himself. In him each separate piece of building, properly fitting into its neighbor, grows together into a temple consecrated to the Lord. You are all part of this building in which God himself lives by his Spirit.  
(Phillips)

The wall to be destroyed here is the wall separating Hebrews and Gentiles. After hearing various whites employ this passage it seems important that we point out that all whites, other than Jews, and blacks are Gentiles. I emphasize this because it appears that some whites tend to put themselves in the place of Jews when they use this passage. Segregation between whites and blacks is a POST PENTECOSTAL PHENOMENON which gave the whites social, economic, political, domestic, legal, and human advantages over the oppressed and disenfranchised blacks. This system or mold has determined the policy of the church and is today requiring it to pay prices far beyond the price which obedience to the gospel would have required. Inasmuch as segregation is a wall built by one group of Gentiles in an effort to separate themselves from other Gentiles, and such wall has been constructed since the writing of the passage in question, factual evidence declares it to be a sin in the church.

Though some would classify this problem as SOCIAL and hurry to contend that it need not concern the church, it remains to be a number one problem in and a deterrant to the growth, peace, sanctity, unity and integ-

riety of the church. But even if it were a completely social matter, Christianity strikes a deathly blow at that. In Col. 3:11 and Gal. 3:28, Paul says in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek (Jew against Gentile), circumcision nor uncircumcision (Religio-Socio), bond nor free (economic), Sythian nor Barbarian (Intra-Gentile or Anti-Jewish Hostilities), male nor female (sexual). Somehow this apostle willed to see a full and complete unity in Christ. These are not mental ideas to which we give theological or philosophical assent; they are actualities which are just as real as the difference which existed between and within the ethnic groups.

The paved super highways which segregation has built into and through the church are expressways to annihilation and divine casting off. These are highways to destruction on which our church and society spend exorbitant funds to maintain and they depict the church as something other than the city of God.

But since man is a whole being and incapable of functioning in parts he can know Spiritual Equality when he relates to others only when he knows he is accepted, without reservations, by those who dare to pose as his brothers.

Spiritual Equality cannot be found in isolationism or separateness. It is found and grows in conditions conducive to genuine fellowship. Spiritual Equality demands a single church under God wherein physical distinctions such as race, sex, social standing and economic ability draw no lines. It is not enough to allow Negroes to enter buildings wearing the signs CHURCH OF CHRIST: those who are baptized must have all the freedoms of the life of that congregation including the opportunity to teach, become an officer, and serve as full-time minister. Nothing short of complete equality within the life of the church can invite Spiritual Equality. Less than

this is less than the church. Spiritual Equality requires also that our white brothers understand that we blacks do not begin to think that integration has blossomed upon the horizon because they will now consider allowing us to come into their services. Whites must also integrate into black congregations and become a living part of these congregations. Spiritual equality for the Negro and Caucasian must mean not only that you can open the door for me; it must also mean that I can open the door for you without either having any hesitancy toward entering because of who opened the door. We must move beyond the point of tokenism and ascend to the level of a free flow of complete interchange and meaningful interaction with whites coming into and taking full membership in Negro churches and Negroes taking full membership in white churches. This offers some hope for doing away with the sinful division in the church of WHITE and NEGRO or more commonly called COLORED churches of christ. Desire to give birth to spiritual equality requires that we support efforts aimed at true equality in the church and not stand in the shadows of non-commitment waiting to see which direction matters are moving. But to give birth to this kind of church requires an absolute cessation of concepts of inferiority and superiority as we function in and out of the church. It requires an end to these differences which have taken anchorage in men's hearts and prevented the existence of the true Church of Christ. This sin has never permitted the true church to exist in reality on the American frontier; it has only accommodated a denominational Church of Christ that is obviously divided and deeply split asunder by racial antagonisms. And the sad part of it all is that this church, while sick and bleeding profusely from the knife wounds of racism, has licked its own wounds and subsequently dared to announce that it was healed by the true physician of the soul.

As we attempt to allow a situation to exist in which the Lord may permit His Church to abide, there is no question but that we must consider the extent to which racist attitudes stand as a formidable deterrant to our success. It is not a question of will the church die if we do not completely integrate; the fact is that it is dead already by the hand of the cancer of segregation. The support the church has given segregation has done irreparable damage to the souls of many and so damaged their spiritual organs that they are perhaps beyond repair. Thus, looking at the issue from that angle of will the church die is futile. Our paramount question is, what are our chances through integration of reviving or giving birth to the true church in our times.

Since racism is division, and the church and acknowledged division are entities which cannot successfully exist in a single situation, no honest person or true christian should contend for the existence of the true church in the midst of known or acknowledged segregation.

Objectivity is required to secure spiritual equality. One of the requirements of objectivity is the recognition that while blacks make some contribution to this present dilemma, the originators and prime perpetrators of this idol god are whites. Since perjudice means to pre-judge, Negroes are not normally guilty of prejudice as to the issue at hand. It is the Negro that is rejected, disliked, hated, and maltreated by the whites for no reason. For the life of us, we cannot determine with any remote certainty why we are hated, despised, rejected, treated as the filth of the earth, and thought less of than pets. The blacks' resentment of the whites is not a matter of pre-judgment; he feels this way because he has been abused, mistreated, hated, despised and misused for no reason at all. After all this, why should the Negro trust and love whites. His feelings

of hostility are justified as to cause while whites' attitudes toward blacks have as a basis only his own past wrongs for which he now refuses to repent. Now realizing the sinful fruit of his past, whites from all corners are in a hope of averting this nation from destruction making demands upon the blacks far greater than any contribution they are willing to make to salvage the nation. Blacks are now being asked to forget all the lynching, drownings, murders, legal injustices and social inequities of the past without any warranty that those uninvited evils of the past will become dead history and not surely be reenacted or revisited upon them.

The blacks' greatest single sin in this matter of segregation is accommodation. It is the whites who created the system and it is they who are primarily yet maintaining. The facts are sure. Blacks will not again be led to serve a church or a god who allows them to be at home on levels inferior to others who also claim Him as Lord but who are also incidently a different color. However, in spite of all the evil the blacks have received by the hand of whites, this group apparently stands more ready to receive whites than whites are ready to receive them.

Blacks question the ability of the white church to meet the challenge and the threat of destruction which racism offers the church. If its ministers can be silenced by segregationist members, ultra-conservative elders, economic pressures or the idea of it not being time, it is destined for the ruins which are certain to be left behind by a changing society. At this point the church has no choice but to change or die. Such church cannot bring spiritual redemption or equality. Its obligation to speak smooth things overshadows the demands of the gospel. It is the ministry that must point up the ills of a sick church in an ailing society. The church must, for purposes of self survival, admit that the gospel neither made America



decide nor accept integration. At this point the gospel suffered a resounding defeat because of weak followers. This is the sad commentary on the gospel. Race relations have shown that our society turns on the value of the dollar and not that of the soul. As a matter of fact, the church has not itself accepted this message of equality. The deliverance which the blacks have received has not been by the god of the church. Such deliverance has been the blessing of the god of the courts, the god of economics, the god of the legislature, and the god of pressure groups.

Since 1954, blacks have been the hypocrisy of the churches. For the thinking Negro, the white church is an institution that has sold its soul to the lord of economics and self-willed people. Since 1954 the white church, without denominational identity, has ignored the cries of disenfranchised Negroes.

However, the black church has been a refuge for these people. After being driven from publicly-owned property when Negroes desired to meet thereon to discuss their grievances, the Negro found himself backed into his church building because it was the only thing he owned. But even in this the Negro Church of Christ has had no part. Thus, in a meaningful way, the Church of Christ has had no part in the relieving of pressures of the oppressed blacks.

After the Supreme Court ruling of 1954, the Church of Christ became more segregated than before. Prior to this time whites frequented Negro meetings and services. After this ruling, there came an abrupt lessening of this limited interaction which came to be a symbol of approval of equality and brotherhood rather than condescension and accommodation.

Today, the Church of Christ stands further from true integration than it did before 1954. Blacks of the Church of Christ have found them-

selves in a strange dilemma. We condemned our black denominational brothers and denied them fellowship because they called their ministers reverend, had instrumental music or sold dinners to support their churches. However, we have found ourselves rejected by whites of the church whom we thought were our brothers. We found that we had increased our burdens and strengthened the shells of unwelcomed isolationism. Now we know that being baptized into a spiritually torn organization does not give us what we need, neither is Christ a part. Spiritual equality by definition is a union in which Christ shares.

Racial segregation is a definite sin and today stands as the greatest single irresistible sinful divider of the church. This sin strikes far deeper at the efforts of spiritual equality than any other. Racial segregation denies the fullness of humanity. It denies that blacks are full men. It denies true conversion on the part of anyone who practices or propagates it. It does something to a man that no piano or title of praise may even indicate. As a matter of fact, true fellowship might more easily be attempted in the presence of instrumental music than in a hot bed of segregation. The church is presently competing for number one position as the strongest citadel of segregation. The contemporary Church of Christ is distinctively one of the most segregated of churches. The level sought by spiritual equality cannot be found in conditions endorsing racial superiority and inferiority. A segregated church is swiftly becoming an antiquity in our nation and world. Those who cling to such obsolescence make contributions to the church becoming a permanent part of a phase of our culture that is destined for oblivion.

Spiritual equality cannot be attained by requesting blacks to ignore the injustices and inequities which have been inflicted upon them by whites

when no real repentance has been shown. True redemption lies in genuine repentance by the whites and complete forgiveness by the blacks followed by mutual acceptance. This is so because spiritual equality is based on full equality and mutual trust. There must be an admission to both the fact and the reason of the blacks' distrust of the whites if the church is to act redemptively in this milieu. Otherwise, all we can prove is that all efforts comparable to this present undertaking is but too little too late.

Why has the contemporary Church of Christ which claims the Bible as its source, its ground for reason, and its justification for existing while knowing that the Bible teaches human equality, love and equity just as profoundly as it does baptism dared to contend for the validity of baptism from the mountain top but has been as silent as a moss covered tombstone in a cemetery on the issue of true love? How could this church, claiming itself as the Lord's church sit by uncommitted when this issue has sent men to their graves prematurely, caused our nation to reel and rock like a drunken man in his stupor and require unparalleled legislation, remain silent? Is the church's justification for not speaking to be found in the idea that it has not believed or had not learned. The church can ill afford to have been silent when our nation was trying to decide whether blacks were still two-thirds of a man and hardly more than chattel, a fit subject for breeding. Neither can the church wait until it is completely safe before it identifies with right after the nation has acted more redemptively through its executive, judicial and legislative branches of government.

Inequalities defy the existence of spiritual equality and the church. They cannot exist together and, wherever they are found, they announce the

absence of the true church.

Desire for spiritual equality demands that the church repent of its attitudes of passiveness and relying on selfish, ignorant, fearful and Uncle Tom Negroes to report on what Negroes want. Spiritual equality steers the church in the direction of a search for the true answer and not merely an answer that will allow sin to fester and grow. Either the whites of the church will communicate with informed and intelligent blacks or it will perish.

Spiritual equality requires that blacks repent of the sin of parasitism and pay their own way according to their ability. More black churches should, on the basis of economic stability of the congregation, be self-supporting and not depending on the "white church" to support them.

Blacks must demand equality in employment, opportunity, and citizenship and in turn be willing to pay their own way according to their level of existence. Continuing to take hand-outs from whites is a sure omen to the continuation of ideas, concepts and practices of segregation and absence of spiritual equality.

Initially, I stated that we must in our efforts to redeem and preserve both ourselves and the world consider the whole man. By this I mean that man's life must be considered at every point. The self-respecting black of today and tomorrow does not and will not hear you when you talk of spiritual equality when every piece of literature, filmstrip, Herald of Truth speaker, and giant effort of evangelism set forth only whites. He wants to know why blacks are not featured. He does not believe you have an answer which his God would accept. So long as these conditions persist, announced spiritual equality is nothing more than a clanking symbol. Presently, blacks are so baffled in their efforts to understand

the white man in association with his God and church that he is largely convinced that they are nothing short of fronts for his untended sins.

In all honesty, I cannot conceive of the existence of the true church or spiritual equality so long as any of us have any reservations about the other because of some god-given feature. Spiritual equality remains only a potential that is without adequate soil in which to develop so long as discrimination impregnates the church with this over-riding sin. Spiritual equality bears an affinity to social, racial, legal, political, domestic, human and personal equality. So long as you reject me, or I reject you because of ethnic origin, we will be that far short of Spiritual Equality.

A presumption of the mediocrity, worthlessness, inhumanity and sub-human level assigned to the Negro must go. Any law which announces how demoralizing and dehumanizing it is for perfection, meaning white, to be either associated with or to be accused of associating with subhuman, meaning Negroes, is sinful.

Laws such as this stand boldly as a debilitating influence to any effort to improve inter-racial relations. Spiritual equality requires that christians not only must live in disregard of such evil concepts; christians must work to repeal such laws.

Spiritual Equality rejects a denominational Church of Christ when such denominationalism is based upon racism that has produced regimented segregated congregations. It is this legacy that has dealt a death nail blow to the church. I am led to believe that only immediate surgery can save the church.

Since one of the defenses for the presence and continuation of segregation has to do with an acclaimed reciprocity of desire as to the per-

petuation of this evil system, I will make a closing comment in this regard. Whites who contend for the system remaining point out that blacks want to be all to themselves. While this is true as to some blacks and certainly reason for such absurd reasoning exists, it must be remembered that it makes no more difference with God what blacks want than it does with Him as to what whites want. This wall which sin has erected in spite of the cross must go.

All who come to Christ are required to pay the price of sacrificing personal desires. This includes racism.

These are some limited matters to be considered in our concern for spiritual equality. I trust God will aid us in overcoming.