

Sick and Tired

by Marian E. Wright

THE YOUTH NIGHT ADDRESS AT THE AMERICAN BAPTIST CONVENTION IN PHILADELPHIA

THE FACT THAT four young men sitting down at a lunch counter in North Carolina could cause such a stir throughout the American scene vividly reflects that America had managed to forget that she had a minority problem. She had managed to forget that there were people in her midst who did not have the minimal rights guaranteed by the Constitution to every citizen. America had closed her eyes to the inequities suffered by Negroes, Puerto Ricans, and other minorities within her borders, and had thereby deluded herself that all was well. That a simple act like ordering a hamburger at a lunch counter, done by millions of Americans every day, could have such ramifications throughout the nation when done by four Negro students in the South is a vivid indication of what our country had allowed herself to forget—or ignore.

Failure to See the "New" Negro

Negro students were reacting against a lot of things when they sat in or participated in freedom rides, kneel-ins, and other civil rights movements which swept the nation. The first thing the Negro students were reacting against was the old myth—the image that the Southern White, and too often the Northern White, held of the Negro as a satisfied, contented creature. In the minds of the white majority there still remained, it seemed, the picture of the old Negro, happy, carefree, dancing it up on a Saturday night. That majority had not even begun to see or recognize the "new" Negro: new in the sense of being edu-

cated middle-class, with very much the same desires as average Americans have. They still held to the image of a hundred years ago. The Negro student was simply trying to say to the South, to America, "Look at me. I'm here. I have wants and needs. I long to be able to express myself fully and freely within this our country, my country as much as yours. I'm tired of living a peripheral existence, watching the mainstream of American life flow by. I want to participate completely; I want to be recognized."

As Negro students, we realized that changing this image was a dual and difficult problem. In trying to react against this image, we had first to tackle it among our own race. Many Negroes, having existed all their lives in a segregated environment, had accepted what the Whites had said about them—that they were inferior, that the races were meant to be separated. Habit is a forceful thing, and one who has for decades been in a dark room fears and resists the light when exposed to it initially. It hurts the eyes. It is difficult to adjust to. The students with their education and youth, not yet sapped of courage, sought to provide a voice for the down-trodden black mass.

Changing this image also entailed transforming the Southern White's image of the Negro, and this also was a difficult task. In order for the Whites in the South to regard the Negroes as human beings like themselves, they would have to change the image they held of themselves. To do this meant overcoming hundreds of years of tradition and practice.

The second thing we were striking

against was the apathy of the Negro middle class—our parents, our professors, our professional leaders. These were the Negroes—say in Atlanta where I attended school—who drove two cars (they're working on the third one now), lived in forty-thousand-dollar homes, frequented their own country clubs and had, they thought, become equal by gathering unto themselves all the trappings of American materialism. Yet these same people, so equal materially, still managed somehow to walk through the back door of a downtown movie theater. These were people who had managed to adjust to an unjust system. As students we were saying, "This is not good enough. Somehow you've got to realize that whatever you acquire externally cannot replace the internal dignity that we must maintain."

If any two words could characterize the Negro students' feeling in America today, they are the words "sick" and "tired." We're sick and tired of being inconvenienced all the time by a ridiculous system. We're sick and tired of having to go out of our way to accommodate a segregationist tradition. Those of us in college, for instance, going downtown on our limited lunch hour to shop, didn't have time to go back to the Negro section to find a Negro restaurant. There were restaurants in the stores in which we were shopping. We didn't have time to try to keep pace, that is, to keep back with the South. Time is too valuable.

Nonexisting Channels of Communication

Another myth the Negro students were reacting against was the claim that any

The author is a young Negro student who has actively participated in the struggle for freedom and equality for her people in the life of our nation.



movement for social change would set the South back fifty years by breaking down all channels of communication existing between the races. This is a terrific myth. It is based on the false premise that communication between the races existed. I submit that there has never been any real, meaningful communication between Black and White in the South. Throughout the South's history communication has been the vertical, paternalistic type, never the equal man-to-man exchange. We didn't know each other.

This was poignantly illustrated to me during the sit-in movement, when I was invited to speak at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga., the white counterpart of our Negro women's college. I don't know how the invitation was arranged, and I was a bit afraid of the kind of reaction I would get. I had been told that the school was about 90 per cent segregationist, 5 per cent uncommitted, and 5 per cent integrationist. This didn't look too promising, but I went. It was a voluntary chapel day (and my experience as a student was that I certainly didn't go to chapel unless I was forced), and I rather expected an empty place. To my utmost surprise, and to the surprise of the girls on the committee who met me, the chapel was filled. The administration came. The faculty came. Even the president came. I felt like a prize specimen. The curiosity of the audience was evident, and I felt within myself that I was something new to them. I spoke very frankly, trying as best I could to characterize the Negro students' goals and, to my astonishment, there was thunderous applause at the end. They wouldn't stop. I was overwhelmed by the warm appreciation of what I had said—and shocked.

Going over to the coke lounge to answer questions afterwards, I was touched by the naïve, but earnest, questions posed by these twenty-one-year-old college girls. I had always, as a Negro youth in the South, accused the Southern White of viciousness toward the Negro. But I learned that day that the problem we had was one of just plain ignorance. I didn't know them, and they didn't know me. They really were sincere when they said the only Negroes they knew were their butlers or their maids. They really did think the NAACP was communist. Engrained in them was the belief that all the Negro wanted was intermarriage.

When I said I had to go and began walking out the door, one girl ran behind me and introduced herself. She said she was from Bennettsville, S. C., my hometown. We inquired about each other and, as I listened, she said, "Isn't it ironic that we could grow up in Bennettsville, a town of 6,000, three blocks away from each other (which we learned in talking), and after twenty

years be brought together in Atlanta due to something like the sit-in movement?" This is the kind of communication we've had in the South, the three-block-away, totally different worlds of Black and White. For the first time, we are beginning to recognize each other down there as human beings.

Time, of Itself, Solves No Problems

Another myth the students were reacting against was the myth of time. We had heard so much talk of time from our parents, our politicians, that we were tired of it. As John Maguire so well says, "People talk about time as if it's a person, as if time does things of itself." Time doesn't act alone. Time is neutral. It is meaningful in so far as we make it so. People always told us, when we were impatient, to wait, to "let time take care of it." But time on its own had not done too much for us.

Unfortunately, since 1954 the segregationists have used their time far more valuably than the moderates, both Negro and White, who are for integration. The moderates have been sitting back and saying, "Let's go slow. We shouldn't push too rapidly. With time, all will work itself out." The failure in the South and the ability of the extremists to get into the public eye has been due to the fact that too many "good" people have been sitting back, keeping quiet, waiting for time to take care of everything. But time doesn't act. It is what we do with it that counts.

Racial Prejudice Is Everybody's Problem

Having lived in a small Southern town, and having attended college in Atlanta—all in the Negro world—I got the shock of my life when I had a chance to go abroad during my junior year. For the first time I could look on America and see it through the eyes of somebody else. I didn't like too much what I saw. Talking with the African along the Paris street, I was always embarrassed and frustrated when asked, "What are you Negroes doing over there to get your freedom? Why is it that a 'Little Rock' can happen? How is it that America allows such atrocities as the 'Emmett Till incident'?" This brings into focus another bit of faulty thinking that too many of us are guilty of: that the race problem is a Southern problem, or that it is a Negro problem. The African or Russian or Frenchman doesn't ask, "Why do the people of Little Rock act like that?" They ask, "Why does America permit this?" Racial prejudice reflects on the whole country, and it is the responsibility of every one of us to do something about it.

Having lived in the North for two years now, I have been disappointed, when scratching beneath the thin layer of liberalism, to find the same old preju-

dices I thought I had left down South. They are a little more subtle, garbed in sophistication and glib attitudes; but this almost makes them more dangerous. In the South the Negro at least knows where he is. Here he never does; and he meets with ugliness when he least expects it. It is dangerous, too, because the Northerner thinks he is "good," when he really isn't. Too often, he has not even reached the stage that most Southerners have been forced to reach, namely, to recognize that a problem exists.

On my first day at Yale I took a walk. One block away from the campus is Dixwell Avenue, the Negro ghetto. Walking through it, I felt as though I was back in the slums of Columbia, S.C., or Atlanta, Ga. There is no difference between the Southern and Northern ghettos. It's easy to look at racial tensions down South and pat yourselves on the back. But it is another thing to clear the smelly garbage out of your own back yard. The White South is not all wrong in telling Northerners to stay out of their affairs and take care of your own problems. Example strengthens advice.

Racial prejudice is everybody's problem. I cannot stress too much what harm discrimination is doing to us abroad. People of other lands don't want to hear any more of our high-sounding phrases of freedom and equality. They want to see what we are doing. Yet, we continually find excuses for inaction. Whenever a freedom movement breaks forth, too many of us hide behind the epithet, "communist." Even so distinguished a citizen as Harry S. Truman disheartened us sit-inners by saying on several occasions that our movement was communist-instigated. Why? Why must we continue to give the Communists credit for the things we have professed since the beginning of our nation? Look at what we are saying about ourselves. We are saying that we don't have the conviction within ourselves to work for human rights; that Communists have to come in and stir up concern and make us do things we should have done long ago. Let us stop passing the buck. Let us stop thinking of what the next man will say. Let us stop worrying about every little sacrifice that acting on our beliefs will entail.

It has been a moving experience to see the Southern White student join hands with his Negro counterpart to clean up the South. And these Southern White young people have done it at great cost: ostracism, parental contempt, and loss of school support. But they are standing for what they believe is right. And their parents—? If they are going to maintain their children's respect, they are going to have to catch up. Parents have been outstripped by their children in so many ways. I have been appalled at the questions I have gotten from students in Eastern prep school and college

audiences and to hear them, after my response or in forming their questions, say: "My father told me"; or "But my mother said."

The adults in America have, on the whole, failed miserably. They have too often been guilty of weak decency and of nursing beliefs that they knew would fall under close analysis, so as not to upset the day-to-day cycle of teas, best sellers, and bridge. Americans have got to ask themselves a few basic questions: "Is this the best that we are? Is this what we are going to become? Is racial prejudice an inextricable part of American life? Is it of such value that we are going to let it drag us down in the world arena, as well as continue to degrade us spiritually?" We are going to have to make a choice, or else lose out. If we are to maintain our self-respect and the respect of countries the world over, we are going to have to change—and quickly so!

The Failure of the Church

Finally, a word about the church. It, too, has failed miserably. The church, which should have been the forerunner in this type of struggle, has come to be the donkey's tail too often. One of the things that upset me most on our sit-in committee occurred one day when we discussed having kneel-ins in some of the Atlanta churches. The White students who had gone along with us on everything else drew back in protest. "Not the churches. This is the worst place—the area that is most personal. Don't bother the churches!"

I remember how bitter I felt on a beautiful Easter morning in Raleigh, N.C., as I stood on a corner across from a Baptist church and watched six of my friends, three white, three Negro, walk up the church steps to attend service. Having heard that the sit-in movement was holding a conference at Shaw University across the street, the Baptist church apparently had anticipated action like this, so their ushers were alert and ready. As my six friends walked up the steps, four well-groomed, efficient ushers rushed out to meet them and push them back down. Meanwhile, inside, the congregation heartily sang, "He Is Risen." A beautiful Easter morning! "He Is Risen." It's a mockery of God.

We are going to have to make up our minds as to who we are and who we are going to become. Are we Christians, or aren't we? There can be no middle ground there. Do we believe in brotherhood, or don't we? Too often, we say we cannot interfere with the South. But it is not a question of the North interfering in the South, but rather a question of the South interfering in the nation. It is not a question of one man interfering with another. It is a question of man interfering with God's mandate to love his brother. Who are we? And who are we going to be?

THIS WE CAN DO

Attitudes of youth on any particular problem of our society range from the fervor of rebellion and activism to the coldness of indifference and apathy. Part of this wideness in range can be attributed to varying degrees of enthusiasm, concern, and one's outlook. But one thing that is characteristic of most positions we take on a particular issue is the lack of a clear answer to the question, "But what can I do?" Due to a lack of clear direction or open channels for expressing our concern, we often are stymied and as a result fail to do anything.

Miss Wright has confronted us with a problem that is a mar on the face of our country and our society. What can we as youth do about it? Here are some suggestions of what we, as youth groups, can do.

1. **Become acquainted** with the basic problems of prejudice and discrimination that exist within our community. One aid in this project is the **Community Survey** available from the Division of Christian Social Concern of the American Baptist Convention, Valley Forge, Pa. (priced) This is a survey which we, as youth, can make. It will mean some work but through it we should be able to gain a new perspective of our community and its problems.
2. **Invite a speaker** to our youth group from one of our community agencies or organizations (such as the Fair Housing Bureau, Urban League, U.S. Employment Service, NAACP, etc.) or a school principal, or a member of our municipal government. Ask them to present the role and place of minorities within our community.
3. **Have a panel discussion** by representatives of the various minority and ethnic groups within our community. Plan to discuss exactly what problems of discrimination and prejudice must daily be confronted.
4. **Use the preceding article**, "Sick and Tired," as a discussion starter for our youth group. Raise pertinent questions such as "Do we really know the minority group member?" "What is the mission of our church in this area?" etc.
5. In light of this article, **have a depth Bible study** and see what the Bible has to say in the area of race relations. Some passages which might be used are: Psalm 133; Micah 6:1-8; Malachi 2:10; Matthew 7:7-12; Mark 12:29-31; Romans 12:9-10; I Corinthians 12:12-26; I John 4:20-21.

These are only five of the many possibilities. The real responsibility lies in what we as individual youth do. When we learn to accept persons as persons rather than as things, a great step forward shall have been taken. But in order to accomplish this we must become acquainted with persons and aware of their needs. The foregoing suggestions may be an aid in this process.