

University of Mississippi

eGrove

---

Publications

Civil Rights Archive

---

1-1-1900

## What Price Church Unity?

Jesse H. Roberts

Follow this and additional works at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/civ\\_pubs](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/civ_pubs)



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Roberts, Jesse H., "What Price Church Unity?" (1900). *Publications*. 30.

[https://egrove.olemiss.edu/civ\\_pubs/30](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/civ_pubs/30)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Civil Rights Archive at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

### WHAT PRICE CHURCH UNITY?

When the attempts at interracial worship began in the Fall of 1963 at Jackson, Mississippi, my emotional response reminded me of something I had not thought about very deeply in recent years. That was the fact that I was born and reared a rebel. As I began to hear about Methodist ministers whom I know — men who had never lived in the South, and some of whom had never been there before — who were going to Jackson churches as outsiders I felt very strongly that a great deal was at stake here which did not meet the eye. For one thing, I knew that many of these men are pastors of churches in the North which are not integrated. I also felt very deeply that what was needed was deeper understanding of the South before any lessons could be taught, if, indeed, the South did not know the lessons.

Therefore, during the first few days of the Jackson events I had lunch with the group of men who had, in a sense, sponsored the men in their trips to Jackson, and some of whom went later. I recommended that a seminar be organized between men from North and South, and through such a means enter into an adventure of greater understanding. They expressed interest, but were so engrossed in getting funds for jail bonds that it soon became obvious that they would not be diverted. Feeling that great harm was being done, I began to talk to other men, including Dr. Robert B. Pierce, and it became our conclusion that we should write to Bishop F. Gerald Ensley, who is chairman of the Board of Christian Social Concerns, urging him to set up such a seminar and have the Board sponsor it. This I did, as did others. He responded, and the seminar was arranged so that we may come to a greater understand of each others' deepest desires for the Church, the Nation, and the World. We are concerned about the brokenness of the Church, and how it can become more inclusive, and we are also concerned about whether or not organic union is important; for it seems to me that the methods of dealing harshly or defiantly with each other may very easily sever the slender tie that binds us together.

When The Methodist Church was united in 1939, I was living in the South, where I had been born in Alabama. When I finished college I served for fifteen months in South Alabama, then came to Evanston, Illinois to go to seminary. This year I will complete twenty years in the Rock River Conference. I have maintained my contacts in the South. My family, whom I visit every year, are all still there, and I own property in Alabama. I feel that the North is ahead of the South in some ways in regard to the race question, but not enough so for the North to feel that it has all the answers.

I- It seems to me that one very important point for the Northerner to understand in dealing with the South is the psychological effect of the history of the last one hundred years. After 1865 the South was occupied until 1877. To give a graphic illustration of how the Civil War has influenced even the present generation of the defeated South, I refer to my own family. My Grandmother Roberts was ten years old when the Civil War ended. She was twenty-two years old, already married, and rearing a family when the Northern troops left the area after twelve long years of occupation. I refer to my grandmother because my grandfather died before I was born. But grandmother's life overlapped mine by fourteen years. As a boy, I knew and conversed with many Civil war veterans, who, after the surrender at Appomattox, had to literally beg their way home. The fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers of the people now living in the South were the ones who fought the war — and lost. We ministers, of all people, should know

something about the effectiveness of oral tradition, to say nothing of the written. I am not saying that the South will not be able to change any more quickly than it has. But I do believe strongly that Northerners will not be able to change it, unless they go about it with loving hearts. Drastic measures taken by Northerners on brief excursions to the South in behalf of racial justice will only remind them of the humiliation which they have never completely forgotten.

If we would make the Gospel relevant for our day, we cannot ignore some of the stark facts of history. By 1865 the Northern industry and enterprise had defeated secession. For a long time thereafter they failed to conquer the South. For an equally long time the South failed to conquer itself. A frightful economic disease which brought apathy to the entire South, particularly wherever there had been slavery, was sharecropping and the crop lien. These involved the poor white man as well as the Negro, now free. In many ways they have, almost until modern times, been merely other forms of slavery.

The South has, for most of this one hundred years, also struggled with the education problem. There were no public schools. Fifty years after the end of Reconstruction the South had much the highest white illiteracy rate in the country, and not until World War II did the factory make any great impression upon the prevailing poverty. In 1900 the New South accounted for a smaller proportion of American manufacturing than did the Old South of 1860.

I am well aware that these facts do not excuse the South. I feel that its position has been morally wrong, and the South is still inadequate in its intellectual and emotional approach to the race problem, as is the North as well. But these facts do somewhat explain the situation, and unless we accept the South as it really is, we cannot hope to properly help to bind up its wounds.

Gordon Allport, in his well-known book, The Nature of Prejudice, makes a penetrating comment on the historical situation from the psychological point of view:

"In order to understand the situation that exists, it is necessary to take a broadly historical point of view. The suffering and humiliation of the South in the Civil War was a trauma of immeasurable magnitude. Aggressive hostilities were released against the North, against the Negro, and against social change in general — all of which could with some logic be blamed for the intolerable situation. To restore self-esteem it became psychologically necessary to counter the intentions and wishes of the North, and to keep the Negro, if not in actual slavery, at least in a subordinate role."

Such an analysis does not excuse the South, but it does at least help to explain why Northerners must be very careful in the methods which they use in their attempts to "help" the South and the Southern Church. There are, without doubt, some methods which will only result in additional reaction against the North and against the Negro. The hostilities which Allport talks about are not limited simply to the uneducated white Southerner. The liberal Southerner of our day has become somewhat objective in his outlook, but even he feels that the North had better tread lightly in dealing with the South. My District Superintendent's viewpoint when I left Alabama to come to seminary says volumes. He was

from a conservative, aristocratic South Alabama family, and in many ways an exceedingly erudite man. Yet, when I insisted that I wanted to do my seminary work in a section of the country other than that in which I had gone to college, he said, "Jess, I don't advise you to go up there among those Northern Methodists. They think they know more than we do." This was only five years after unification and the attitude has somewhat faded, but it could be very easily revived.

James Baldwin, a prominent Negro writer of our day, in his book, Nobody Knows My Name, shows that he understands, even as he does not approve:

"Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or thought one knew; to what one possessed or dreamed that one possessed. Yet it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long cherished or a privilege he has long possessed that he is set free — he has set himself free — for higher dreams, for greater privileges. All men have gone through this, go through it, each according to his degree, throughout their lives. It is one of the irreducible facts of life. And remembering this, especially since I am a Negro, affords me almost my only means of understanding what is happening in the minds and hearts of white Southerners today." (P. 100.)

The above statement is made in Baldwin's chapter on "Faulkner and desegregation". In trying to understand what William Faulkner meant in his advice to "Go slow", he quotes the great Oxford, Mississippi author:

"'My people owned slaves,' says Faulkner, 'and the very obligation we have to take care of these people is morally bad. This problem is...far beyond the moral one it was a hundred years ago, in 1860, when many Southerners, including Robert E. Lee, recognized it as a moral one at the very instant they in turn elected to champion the underdog because that underdog was blood and kin and home.'" Baldwin continues: "But the North escaped scot-free. For one thing, in freeing the slave, it established a moral superiority over the South which the South has not learned to live with until today; and this despite — or possibly because of — the fact that this moral superiority was bought, after all, rather cheaply. The North was no better prepared than the South, as it turned out, to make citizens of former slaves, but it was able, as the South was not, to wash its hands of the matter. Men who knew that slavery was wrong were forced, nevertheless, to fight to perpetuate it because they were unable to turn against 'blood and kin and home'. And when blood and kin and home were defeated, they found themselves, more than ever, committed: committed, in effect, to a way of life which was as unjust and crippling as it was inescapable. In sum, the North, by freeing the slaves of their masters, robbed the masters of any possibility of freeing themselves of the slaves." (P. 105)

and:

"Faulkner is not trying to save Negroes, who are, in his view, already saved; who, having refused to be destroyed by terror, are far stronger than the terrified white populace; and who have, moreover, fatally, from his point of view, the weight of the federal government behind them. He is trying to save 'whatever good remains in those white people'. The time he pleads for is the time in which the Southerner will come to terms with himself, will cease fleeing from his conscience, and achieve, in the words of Robert Penn Warren, 'moral identity'. And he surely believes, with Warren, that 'Then in a country where moral identity is hard to come by, the South, because it has had to deal concretely with a moral problem, may offer some leadership.'" (P. 106)

Baldwin does not believe that the time which Faulkner asked for exists, either North or South, but it seems to me that he provides a setting in which we may understand that only the Southerner himself can come to grips with his own conscience. The Northerner cannot do it for him. Baldwin indicts the North just as severely as he does the South when he says in his chapter, "Nobody Knows My Name",

"It must also be said that the racial setup in the South is not, for a Negro, very different from the racial setup in the North. It is the etiquette which is baffling, not the spirit. Segregation is unofficial in the North and official in the South, a crucial difference that does nothing, nevertheless, to alleviate the lot of most Northern Negroes." (P. 93)

and:

"When a race riot occurs in Atlanta, it will not spread merely to Birmingham, for example. The trouble will spread to every metropolitan center in the nation which has a significant Negro population. And this is not only because the ties between Northern and Southern Negroes are still very close. It is because the Nation, the entire nation, has spent a hundred years avoiding the question of the place of the black man in it." (P. 98)

II- With this kind of situation, it is understandable why sincere and concerned men and women are taking almost any step which might draw attention to the necessity of the Church to take its stand and become a leader, instead of a follower, of the contemporary culture.

Considerable concern has rightly been placed upon the spiritual unity of the Church, and upon the necessity of its being inclusive of all who desire to worship in the Spirit and Name of Christ. With the coming of the report of the Committee of Five and further consideration of the question of the Central Jurisdiction at our General Conference in the Spring of 1964, many feel that it is imperative that the dividedness of The Methodist Church be dramatized in these months prior to the sessions. Jackson, Mississippi, was chosen for this

dramatization because it has been felt that they would be pretty sure to get the kind of reaction which would build up concern and bring action. Some of those who have focused on Jackson have stated confidently that God is directing this emphasis. In the December, 1963 issue of Behold, the magazine published by the Inner City Methodist Ministers' Fellowship of the Rock River Conference and the Lexington Conference of The Methodist Church, John F. Baggett and Philip M. Dripps said,

"God has chosen Jackson, Mississippi to dramatize to that part of Christ's body known as Methodism its sinful brokenness. The Methodists of Jackson cannot be condemned as more sinful than the rest of the people of our world-wide fellowship. The point that God is making through the Jackson situation is that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."

No man has a right to question what another man may believe to be the voice of God to him. However, we do have a right to question whether that voice has been properly understood. There are many who may have been just as attuned to the voice of God who feel that greater results might be obtained for both North and South if these men focused their attention upon the racial evils of their own area -- an area which they understand far better than the South. I have received information that a group from New York has been "harrassing" the Jackson churches in recent weeks. They go, so the report is, to Capitol Street and Galloway Memorial Churches and kneel in what appears to be simulated prayer at the altar during the entire service. It is not difficult to see how such actions may be interpreted as pharisaic, and to believe that they serve no constructive purpose at all. This is certainly the interpretation their actions are receiving even by many Southern liberals -- people who have for years been in the forefront of interracial leadership. It is not, in my opinion, providing the kind of communication which will move toward reconciliation and unity.

There are concerned Christians, both North and South, who believe that the Church should be inclusive to the extent of welcoming people of all variations who have a common faith. I believe this, and have tried to practice it. When I was a pastor in the South Negroes frequently visited my churches. In my last two churches in the metropolitan area of Chicago we have received Negro members. The brokenness of the Church is, indeed, a tragedy, and whatever can be done to bring about physical unity should be done, particularly if it represents spiritual unity.

But the Church's brokenness does not extend simply across racial lines. Protestants do not as a rule worship with Catholics, or Catholics with Protestants. The Anglicans do not accept the validity of Methodist ordination. Many denominations still practice closed communion. And so it goes. Physical disunity cuts across all of Christendom. There are many signs of hope, as we move toward greater physical or organic unity. Yet, our real unity is not found merely in organization or in close physical proximity. This can be an aid, but it is not the only unity we have. And we all know that the Spirit of Christ moves across all lines which separates us, and binds us together in Him. His prayer, "that they all may be one", is an imperative upon us, but it did not refer simply to organization. The criterion of progress may not be "where are we?", so much as "are we moving in the right direction?", and "are we moving as fast as we can in a constructive manner?" The criterion for a pastor will be whether or not he can say, with Paul, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision".

The history of anything resembling integration in the churches in Chicago goes back no more than about a dozen years. During the early part of this period some Methodist churches stationed their ushers at the bottom of the stairs and asked would-be Negro worshipers to go to another church. I could produce actual eye witnesses, if necessary, to document this. During this past summer negroes were arrested in Chicago for "disturbing the peace" in their demonstrations. Among these were Dick Gregory, who was arrested in Jackson and recently in Atlanta. Were these policemen in Chicago who made arrests not a part of the Church, just as those were in Jackson who made arrests on the steps of the church? Does the life and influence of the Church end at the edge of the sidewalk? And what is the basic difference between a church which will not accept a Negro worshiper and one which will not accept a Negro pastor? The majority of Chicago's churches are guilty of the latter kind of exclusiveness. I submit that this, too, is brokenness.

Now, organic union is not everything. But it is something. It can be one of the means toward more complete spiritual union. It seems to me, therefore, that we need to make every effort to retain this tie that binds us, fragile thread that it may seem to be at times. Throughout the South there are churches, or groups within churches, which are considering withdrawal from the denomination, I am aware of one which already had withdrawn—a church responsible for producing a bishop, a theological professor, and another minister or two. In spite of their rejection of inclusiveness, that church has not been completely ineffective as a Christian group.

The Southern men may have a different viewpoint, but I believe that the Southern ministers and laity can do more to maintain unity and achieve inclusiveness in their area than we from the North can, with all our sincerity of purpose. I also submit that if we try to help, we should rely upon their knowledge and advice, and not assume that we know better than they the methods which are needed in their area of the country.

III-A final thing for ministers to consider, it seems to me, is respect for each other, particularly as it relates to a minister's responsibility to his congregation, and to that of another man. Unless a minister becomes, first of all, a pastor, his prophetic utterances will have little effect. A minister must come to know his people, love them, know how to live with them, and like them in their badness as well as their goodness. He cannot use methods which separate and alienate people and expect constructive change in his people. For a minister of the same denomination, or another denomination, to think that he will do good by going into a part of the country with which he is not familiar, to another minister's church where he rejects the possibility that the minister may be just as concerned as he is, and the fact that the minister has only recently been assigned to the church and has not had time to relate to his people, and that his fellow minister implores him not to do what he plans to do, and fails to recognize that the present generation of the white South is still chafing with resentment over the defeat suffered a hundred years ago from the North, and that the South will learn from almost anyone before listening to a Northerner on the race question is, it seems to me, hardly observing the ministerial Golden Rule, or being realistic.

It also fails to take proper note of the good work which has been done in the South through many years by Christian people concerned with the education of

the Negro, and the millions of dollars given by Southern people for this cause.

Surely we cannot ignore the fact that negro people are run out of Northern communities, are jailed, and are refused membership in many of the churches. Very few of our suburban churches in the North will tolerate Negroes as anything other than visitors. I recently read the following four points of instruction in the newsletter of a Northern minister who has served an integrated inner city church and is now serving in a suburban church where he must work in an atmosphere of some opposition on the race question. This is an inadequate statement, but was judged to be the best that could be given in view of the varying views of the congregation. In the face of some agitation after which he felt it necessary to take a position, he used this moderate philosophy because he believed complete candidness would do the cause more harm than good at that point:

#### A PRACTICAL WORD

"Very few communities in America will escape the problem of racial turmoil. Although we may not escape it we may indeed keep it from being destructive.

The minister and lay leaders of your church urge consideration of the following points:

1. Keeping cool heads and moderate spirits is absolutely necessary so we can understand what people say and mean. Emotional hysteria so distorts words and actions until nobody knows what anybody is meaning.
2. When we recently had two negro visitors at a morning service our people acted just as we suggested in point one. Whatever one's private feelings may be (and each is fully entitled to his own) this response was the most practically helpful. It undoubtedly saved us from embarrassment and trouble.
3. Our church may become the target for busy-body extremists on this issue. Some extremists may come out and kneel at our altar or on our steps, etc. We suggest to our people to take it quietly and make no issue of it. Your minister will act this way.
4. We suggest that you find ways to spot the immoderate person — on either side of the issue — and not follow his lead."

One does not need to use the race issue as an illustration. Take any subject A wise pastor does not try to change a man's mind by attacking his viewpoint and saying, "Oh, you're all wrong. How stupid can you get?" Rather, a pastor who hopes eventually to win his layman may say, "Well, I can see how one could hold that viewpoint". Obviously, this shows proper respect, and keeps the way open for more conversation later.

Just as we do in the North, a dedicated minister of the South must decide whether he will stay and go as far as he can in the direction of the ideal, or whether he will take the absolute stand and perhaps be moved out of the South

simply because no church will take him. The man who lives and works in the South is the best judge of how far he can go toward the ideal, and what methods he must use in relating to his people. This, of course, is assuming that a minister and his supervisors are sincere men of God. Without doubt the problem is complicated by some men who are not sincere pastors or dedicated men of God, but politicians, gaining power by identifying with the status quo, and retaining that power by supporting the culture rather than the Church of Jesus Christ. Such men, particularly when they are in places of power, make the problem of obeying our Lord extremely difficult, but there is still a question whether the Northerner can help as much as he thinks he can, or would like to.

Furthermore, it does not follow that a minister will never have any conflicts that are irreconcilable. There are sometimes certain personalities in some congregations who make it necessary to sever the pastoral relations. If the issue is one of conscience, the conflict must not be evaded. I am not suggesting that a Christian minister trim his sails to suit every wind that blows. God expects every man to do some original thinking and acting. He expects us to stick our necks out, in behalf of any principle of enterprise that we think is really worth while. He expects us to back our judgement with everything we possess, and with our very lives if necessary. Yet, an arbitrary assertion of authority is not the best way of accomplishing what is needed. The minister must be an advisor, and not a pope. The measure of our success will not ultimately be in terms of numbers, or size of budget, nor perhaps even in terms of our martyrdom, but in terms of subtle spiritual and psychological changes in persons.

Paul preached differently to the Athenians, who had no Old Testament tradition, from the way he preached to the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia.

There are times, therefore, when the minister must be prophet as well as pastor. But it seems pretty well agreed that one cannot successfully be a prophet until he has become a pastor in the truest sense of the word. We do not move into a parish and immediately start upsetting and changing things. If we do, we scare the sheep, or if they are not all sheep, some may organize and throw us out. We can, by rough methods, do more harm than good. When we go to a new congregation, we get to know our people, and let them know us. They must first know us as sincerely tender if our periods of austerity and thunder are to have their proper effect.

Now, if these are the methods we use on our own congregation, we should also treat another man's congregation in a way that we believe to be consistent with good pastoral procedure.

S. Parkes Cadman once said that he believed that in the pulpit the love of love should be greater than the love of truth. Said he, "Life is at best for many of your congregation a severe struggle, and what they need is not denunciation but encouragement. They do not need to be driven, but led into green pastures."

I would, therefore, enter a plea for us to remember that the bringing of the sword was not the only teaching of Jesus. Across our nation today there is arising a philosophy that the way to get things done is to pick out the sores of discontent and rub them raw. Community renewal organizations such as the Industrial Areas Foundation in Chicago follow this principle. They find a common

enemy and organize the community around that common enemy by the method of attack. Picketing, and other forms of demonstration, as well as news coverage, are the methods used to rally the community around the cause.

But I would plead for a re-emphasis of the principle of reconciliation in human relations, and a consideration that Jesus also said, "Blessed are the peacemakers". This may not get all injustices righted "right now" (and I sympathize with this desire), but more constructive work may result in the long run.

Jesse H. Roberts,  
St. John's Methodist Church,  
Chicago, Illinois.