

# Racial Attitudes in the U.S.A.

A TALK GIVEN BY MRS. SHIRLEY TURNER

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I have been asked to speak about racial attitudes in the U.S.A. Obviously these are only my impressions as gained from a recent four week visit during which I attended both the World Federation of Methodist Women meetings and the World Methodist Conference in Denver, Colorado,—the latter having 6 000 delegates from nearly every country in the world. At the Conference I participated in the commission on "The Church and Race". In 1969, I spent 13 weeks in the States on what they call an "exposure tour" during which time I attended conferences and interviewed significant people in order to gain insights into the part women are playing in the Church, new forms of ministry, Christian Education and the racial situation in the U.S.A.

Many white South Africans believe that they have overcome all their racial prejudice, find they still have some lessons to learn when confronted by the attitudes of whites and blacks in the U.S.A., attitudes which have been developed by a society where more and more people are encouraged to "tell it like it is".

At the conference a film was shown on South Africa from the Black point of view. At the conclusion of the showing, I overheard a conversation between a white South African and a black American which went something like this:

White South African: That film was completely one-sided.

Black American: Is it true?

White South African: It showed nothing of what the church is doing.

Black American: But is it true?

White South African: I can show you mines in South Africa where people live together.

Black American: Do you mean Black and White?

White South Africans: No — husbands and wives.

Black American: And that is a privilege?

White South African: Not all white people in South Africa are prejudiced. Why I have even had a coloured person staying in my home.

Black American (too overcome to reply on hearing of this supposed great accomplishment, stares back incredulously).

White South African: You should come to South Africa and see for yourself that things are not as bad as they are painted.

Black American: I would like to, but I have been refused entry into your country.

White South African: How do you expect to

be allowed in if you show films like this? No further dialogue is possible.

For many of us there is a need to break out of the set patterns of our thinking, patterns into which everyday life in South Africa has conditioned us, before we can begin to understand the racial attitudes of the U.S.A., and to see ourselves as others see us.

One person in eleven in the U.S.A. is Black. With a history of capture and slavery, and years of legal disabilities now behind them, they are fighting a battle on two fronts. The first is a struggle for an identity, for an acceptance of self. Success on this front is giving them the weapons for success on the other — the battle for justice — a struggle which has already been won at the federal government level, but is still being fought in the law court — a fight for something which in theory is already there — but which in practice is too often denied by prejudice and selfishness. The first concerns the development of black attitudes — the second the development of white attitudes.

In South Africa the whites learn of Black attitudes mainly by hearsay, rumour and guesswork — in the States there are some Black attitudes which the white cannot escape. I was particularly struck by the change I could sense in the way in which the Blacks were making themselves heard. In 1969 the voices were harsh, the demands exaggerated and too often accompanied by violence and destruction.

In 1971, whilst some whites have been talking of the "cooling of America" and the falling off of the Black Power movement, Black Power is stronger than ever. It now speaks with more assurance, firmly and surely, knowing that it is a force to be reckoned with, and there is no longer any need to resort to violent means. It seems that the developing process of black awareness is coming to fruition.

In 1969, I heard a lot about Black history which the Blacks (and some Whites) were avidly swotting. Afro-American hairstyles and modes of dress were common sights and still are. The Blacks were withdrawing from whites and forming their own kind of apartheid in a mood of defiance. After years of meek acquiescence during which the inferiority attitudes of slavery were perpetuated, there came an over-reaction — perhaps inevitable — perhaps necessary — and a time when no one with a white skin could tell them any longer what they should do or be. "Black is Beautiful" was the rallying cry in 1969, and in 1971 it was my impression that this lesson was one that the Black people were learning fast. Many Blacks that I met, had learned it well and, secure in their own self-acceptance, could make themselves heard without shouting, and could laugh at the indignities which white prejudice still threw in their direction.

I am aware that I have probably exaggerated the degree of change that has taken place in two years, but there is no mistaking its direction. Black awareness is leading to Black assurance.

### **Total Acceptance**

Through this whole process we can see a people trying to prove themselves to themselves as well as to the Whites. As they have tried to do this, some forcefulness and defiance, whilst perhaps unnecessary, is nevertheless understandable. In many areas of life, Blacks tend to push as hard as they can in order to obtain full acceptance for themselves as persons, and will not be content with anything less than full acceptance, in their own eyes, and in the eyes of the Whites with whom they come in contact. For this reason they react sharply to any suggestion of racial discrimination against themselves or other blacks. It is also for this reason that they are very strongly outspoken against South African policies, deal harshly with anyone attempting to justify the situation, and hold in contempt both South

African Whites who hold power, and South African Blacks who tolerate the status quo.

Before leaving the subject of Black attitudes I would like to refer to an interesting point which was debated at the Conference. We were trying to establish whether there existed in any material form a Black racism, a prejudice amongst Blacks towards those of other races similar to the prejudice of white racism. In general, the Whites present felt that Black racism was a fact to be faced, but the Blacks contented that their behaviour was simply a reaction to White racism. I feel it goes deeper than that.

### **Paternalism**

I arrived at Denver airport at about the same time as a delegate from the Congo, in full national costume, and we were met by a welcoming committee which included a Black American woman. The delegate indicated that she needed some American money and was directed by the Black American. "Just go straight down this passage and at the end you will see a place with the letters B.A.N.K.; they will change your money for you." "Thank-you", said the Black delegate. "I can read English". As Eunice's footsteps faded down the passage, this fine example of Black American paternalism turned to me and said "Isn't that just wonderful—she can read English". The delegate is a university graduate from Washington D.C. where she had five years majoring in English and then spent two years in Geneva getting her French degree.

### **Black Power**

Black power, besides being the source of much of the new-found inner power of the Blacks and of some eruptions of violent power that occurred in the earlier stages, primarily means Black political power.

It aims to secure justice for the Black people by organising for voting, self-help, demonstrations, boycotts and political strategy. Compared with South Africa, the individual states and cities have more autonomy and the Federal Government less control over what happens at the local level, and it is here that power groups can and have been effective in bringing about change. It is here where the struggle will continue for many years to come, for in many States and cities, white prejudice is equally intent on maintaining the status quo. The

position varies from State to State, and city to city, with, generally speaking, greater freedom and opportunities for the Black in the north than in the South where the kindly attitude of the Whites towards the Blacks is dependent upon the Blacks "keeping their place".

### Housing and Schools

One of the problems in the cities is housing. In theory "open housing" is the law of the land, and anyone may live anywhere they choose. In practice difficulties are often placed in the way of Blacks wishing to live in certain select areas, and new road development seems to claim the expropriation of comparatively more Black property than White property.

In theory, schools are open to all races. In practice some school boards manage to keep Black scholars to a minimum, and in the south, private, "White only" schools have come into existence.

One of the main targets of Black Power is the police force, for it is here particularly, that differential treatment is given to Blacks and Whites, and this has led to some nasty incidents. The Black Power movement seeks to bring instances of unjust treatment to the notice of the public.

Black power has put considerable pressure on employers to provide equal opportunities for Blacks. Sometimes this pressure takes the form of organised boycotts of the company's products until such time as, the ratio of Black to White employees, unskilled to managerial, approximates to the ratio of Blacks to Whites living in the area or consuming the company's products.

Very often the demands of the Blacks for more power and a share in the decision making processes of commerce, government and the church, have compelled the appointment of what have been called by the Blacks "token niggers". Blacks not quite ready in terms of training and experience, to hold the position into which the pressures of Black power and White guilt has forced them. This can lead not only to some cases of inefficiency, but also to feelings of insecurity in those who hold such positions, knowing that they hold their position simply because they are Black and not on merit. To put the matter in perspective one must

ask why they are untrained, and realise that very often it is because Whites have not provided the necessary training, preferring to allow the token Black to fail on his own rather than enabling him to succeed. If he fails, it only strengthens the convenient excuse of the Whites "They aren't ready yet". If he succeeds the excuse is swept away.

### White Reaction

Let's look now at how the Whites are reacting to the situation. For many years the churches, for example, battled to persuade the suburban Whites to become involved in helping the Blacks in the city ghettos. Eventually, just as they were beginning to meet with some success, the Blacks themselves called a halt — White paternalism towards Blacks was no longer acceptable — and Whites who were concerned to be of some use in the situation, found it difficult to determine what role they could play. The advice of the Blacks was generally that Whites should give them the opportunity to help themselves, and that the liberal-minded Whites should concern themselves with eliminating the prejudice of white suburbia. A phrase was coined to indicate that the race problem was not a black problem. The situation was described as being of a "White problem and a Black condition", meaning that prejudice was a problem, but poverty and powerlessness was only a condition.

Sometimes bowing to the pressure of Black power, sometimes motivated by conviction, the Whites have been granting more power to black people.

However, there is still a reticence to give Blacks control over money, as if this is an area where they cannot yet be trusted. This feeling is probably inspired partly by feelings of guilt that this is the case, and also for the reason that money *is* power. The annual giving to the Missionary Fund of the United Methodist Church has dropped perceptively in the last two years, and some attribute it to the fact that large sums are being channelled to Black movements to be disposed of at the discretion of Blacks.

At the Church and Race commission there was at times open antagonism between Blacks and Whites. Many would find this totally out of place at a church conference, and there is a real query as to whether this is the only way, and that love can only be reached

through hate freely expressed. On the other hand, hate expressed is surely a lesser evil than hate repressed?

Of less significance numerically in the U.S.A. than the Black/White situation, is the position of the American Indian and the Spanish American. The American Indian, descendant of the race whose lands were plundered by the whites from Europe, has for long been ignored. However, their voice is also being heard today, although, because they are so few that they are moving to equality more slowly than the Blacks.

Many Spanish Americans face problems which are not unknown in South Africa. There is a constant flow of illegal immigrants across the border from Mexico where there are inadequate employment opportunities. In the south-western part of the U.S.A. they find employment illegally for very low remuneration, and live under the constant threat of being found and returned across the border by the lorry load.

### **Justice, not charity**

The speaker at this Conference on the subject of Church and Race was John Akar, until recently ambassador to the U.S.A. from Sierra Leone. He spoke strongly against what colonialism and church missionaries had done in Africa, and attacked what he called the American myth of Albert Schweitzer. He pointed out that in all his years of sacrificial work, Schweitzer didn't train a single doctor. Nor many miles from Schweitzer's hospital, an American woman doctor was at work, and when she returned to the U.S.A. she left behind her 30 trained doctors. This illustration emphasises the point which is ultimately the key to racial equality and justice. People need to be trained, not helped. Gifts in kind at times are needed, sometimes urgently, but if their situation is to change, people need to be enabled through education, training and opportunity to become full persons in society. The Black Power movement in the U.S.A. is involved with this enabling process, and it would seem that much in this area is being achieved in other countries.

At the World Federation of Methodist Women meetings I was tremendously impressed at how articulate were many Black women from the developing countries of Africa and learned that this was a result of a programme of leadership training which commenced only

six years ago. These countries are not only developing their industrial and agricultural resources; they are also developing the potential of their people.

As I understand the situation in the U.S.A. it is development that is bringing about an improvement in the lot of the American Black, and which will ultimately bring about social justice and racial harmony. Development is the new word for peace; the new way to social justice.