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Friends and the Race Problem: An Outline for Study

North Carolina Yearly Meeting

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FRIENDS

AND THE

RACE PROBLEM

AN OUTLINE FOR STUDY

Prepared by

THE STUDY COMMISSION

NORTH CAROLINA YEARLY MEETING

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

At the sessions of our Yearly Meeting in August, 1960, a **STUDY COMMISSION** was appointed to

"give prayerful thought and consideration to the difficult and complex problems confronting us in the realm of human relations, to study the race problem on the local and world level, and to seek to ascertain more fully the Mind of Christ for the Society of Friends in our day." *Yearly Meeting Minutes*, pp. 39, 40.

We the duly appointed members of this Study Commission share the following thoughts and observations with you, bearing in mind that we have not furnished answers, but a guide to conscientious study.

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I. FRIENDS AND THE RACE PROBLEM

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Most of us were born and reared in a segregated society. That which we have always known seems natural to us, and our tendency is to accept it without question. Within the past few years, however, these common customs of segregation have been challenged, and we have entered a new era in human relations. Progress comes slowly and painfully, and for many years to come we shall most likely live in the midst of tensions and conflict.

But what if progress did not come? A quick glance back through history reveals some strange things. Religious people once put children to death for their rather's sins, and thought it was right. Religious people once had many wives, they owned slaves, and they exterminated whole populations. Later in history they burned witches at the stake, they executed small boys for petty theft, they imprisoned men for debt, they worked women and small children twelve hours a day in mines and factories. The list could go on and on.

History shows that from time to time the Christian conscience has been awakened at some particular point where it had previously been unaware of any existing wrong. For example, Friends themselves once held slaves without any compunctions of conscience. Then there was a period of disturbance and agitation. John Woolman and others became convinced that a moral wrong was involved. A general awakening occurred, and today there is probably not one Friend in America who would feel that slavery is morally defensible.

Today there is agitation and disturbance among us concerning the basic rights and privileges of Negroes, and their equality as citizens under the Constitution of the United States. Moral and spiritual issues of justice and righteousness are involved. Conflicts and tensions are developing. Men on all sides of the question are quoting scripture to justify their positions.

Could it be possible that our "we know best" attitude toward the Negro — that we should tell him where to sit, stand, eat, live, work, ride, go to church and send his children to school — is a bit unfair? Sometimes when he tries to have something to say about these things there is a tendency to say he is "led by agitators." In a nation dedicated to the ideal of government by the consent of the governed it is only natural for him to think he is entitled to the right of helping to make these decisions, and to the right of being treated like other Americans.

As Southerners steeped in the traditions of segregation, the basic question is not how we feel, but rather what is right and just, and in accordance with the light and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

NECESSITY FOR STUDY

A serious problem confronts us. We shall be living in the years ahead in a society where conflict exists. We must, therefore, honestly set ourselves to facing the issue and dealing with it in the light of our clearest Christian understanding.

It has become a must that we as North Carolina Friends study these problems and keep ourselves abreast of current happenings in this field of social concern. To be uninterested, apathetic, and uninformed is to "put our light under a bushel." Only through intelligent, calm inquiry and searching for the leading of the Spirit can light be shed on the perplexing problems of race. North Carolina Friends can blind themselves to these problems, and thus be engulfed by them; or they can face them courageously and use them as an opportunity for Christian witnessing.

FRIENDLY DISCUSSION

In many meetings discussion of the race issue is carefully avoided, as though the problem would go away if we would ignore it. But can the Church rightly refuse to face a problem which is basically moral and spiritual in nature?

Are we willing to admit that we are not sufficiently mature emotionally, mentally, and spiritually to discuss problems in our Quaker Meetings? We must learn how to consider controversial issues calmly, rationally, prayerfully. This can be done. Already some of our Meetings have shown that the race problem can be discussed with love and understanding by Friends who see things differently.

When Meetings on Ministry and Counsel, Monthly Meetings, Sunday School classes, youth fellowships and other groups approach the problem, it is helpful to remember that our primary responsibility and purpose is to seek the mind of Christ, rather than to promote some particular point of view. Argumentative and belligerent persons are detrimental, no matter what position they may represent.

The problem should be approached in an attitude of penitence, since every one of us is involved in a social system which is in conflict, and which obviously has not followed the will of God through generations past.

World-wide horizons should be kept in mind. The issue is global in scope, and the peace of the world is involved.

As Christians it is our duty to be fair and open-minded, endeavoring to understand the other person's point of view. We must recognize the limitations of our own wisdom, and realize that we ourselves do not have all of the truth. We are all seekers.

THE ROLE OF FRIENDS

As Friends we tend to be very proud of the fact that the Quakers were moral and spiritual pioneers, often being a century or more ahead of their times. We rejoice that through the centuries Friends have wielded an influence for righteousness all out of proportion to their numbers.

When we turn to the present, however, we cannot help being profoundly disturbed. What has become of the pioneering spirit, and the capacity for moral and spiritual leadership? Have we lost something along the way? Are we lagging when we should be leading?

Our emphasis upon the sacred value and worth of each individual, our ideals of equality and democracy, our calling as peace-makers, and our practice of looking directly to the Holy Spirit for immediate guidance and revelation, would seem to place us in a favored position to exercise great spiritual leadership in our troubled times.

We are convinced that North Carolina Friends have a mission to help create a climate where these problems can be studied and discussed deliberately, without emotion and with an honest effort to learn what Christ would do in our situation. Equal opportunity for all of the human family carries with it "the power of an idea whose time has come." We would be less than honest if we did not recognize that this is true, not in some far away place, but here in North Carolina today.

In meeting together as a Study Commission appointed by the Yearly Meeting, we have realized that while the Supreme Court may have dealt with the school integration problem as a legal matter, the whole race question has moral, spiritual and religious implications which we as professed Christians cannot ignore. We know that God requires justice and righteousness of His children. We know that love is basic to the Christian experience, and that good will cannot stop at national or racial lines. We know the Golden Rule of our Lord does not make exception for persons of other races, and that if we would fulfill the law of Christ we must accord to other people the same justice, respect, and love which are the basic desires of our own hearts.

II. SOURCES OF LIGHT AND GUIDANCE

FACING WORLD FACTS: MISSIONS

One has yet to meet the missionary from Africa who is not handicapped by the common knowledge of racial practices in the United States, even among Christians.

Typical of the statements of Friends Missionaries in Africa is that of Wilbur Beeson, who served as a doctor at the Friends Hospital at Kaimosi, Kenya: "I recall sitting with a mission school committee in the middle of Africa. An African had come to complain to the committee because his sister had not been allowed to continue in our Girls Boarding School because of poor grades. He said, 'We know you Americans. You showed what you really are at Little Rock! Members of East Africa Yearly Meeting have been refused service in American eating places. This word of course gets back to Africa quickly.' This has helped fuel the fire of rampant African nationalism which is threatening our mission work in Kenya.

Tom Mboya, a political leader in Kenya, said that he is afraid to speak up for the United States because his political opponents could accuse him of being "soft" toward racial injustice.

We may "see no problem" in our own community and meetings, but others do.

We may "see no problem," but we shall suffer from our blindness if Christianity becomes discredited as a western religion of the white race, while Communism and other pagan ideologies sweep the field.

The writer recently met in New York a Muslim Negro youth who had graduated from a Methodist School in Nigeria who is now ardently working for the Asian-African Solidarity Conference, an organization using the African freedom movement for Communist ends. This has happened to Kenya Quaker students in London who have been coolly received by all but the Communists there.

Is it not time for us to consider whether the church is the house and family of God, or whether it consists only of those whose skin color we approve?

NEW TESTAMENT TEACHINGS

While the term "race relations" does not occur in the Bible, nevertheless, the problem of human relations across national and racial lines has been with man for a long time. In Genesis 43:32 we read, "The Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrew, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians!" Moses said, "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord, even to the tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord

forever." Deut. 23:3. And in the book of John we read: "The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans . . . His disciples marveled that he talked with the woman." John 4:9, 27.

The race issue was closely tied in with Jewish nationalism, but when Jesus touched on it in his discourse at Nazareth, we read that "All they . . . were filled with wrath, and rose up, and thrust him out of the city . . . that they might cast him down headlong." Luke 4:22, 29. When Paul stated that he had been sent to preach to the Gentiles: "They said, Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live. And they threw dust in the air." Acts 22:22, 23.

Significant in the Old Testament is the Book of Ruth. The heroine is a foreigner, a Moabitess! (See par. 1 above) Also the Book of Jonah, in which God's inclusive concern is contrasted with Jewish prejudices.

The whole New Testament bears on the theme of loving one's neighbor. Special reference could be made to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Peter's housetop vision, and the decision of the Jerusalem Council as recorded in Acts 15.

Specific quotations could be cited in vast numbers. Three are given: "God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth." Acts 17:2. "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek." Rom. 10:12. "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons (shows no partiality, RSV), but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him." Acts 10:34, 35.

THE POSITION OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS:

There is a great deal of individual freedom in the Society of Friends, and the individual may think for himself and make moral decisions for himself, answering to God for the sincerity of his thinking. As a corporate group, however, Friends have been clear and forth-right in expressing their testimonies relative to racial justice and good will. Our North Carolina edition of *Faith and Practice* has a "Testimony Against Race Prejudice," (pp. 53, 54) which should be read at this point.

Query No. 10 is entitled "Attitudes in Race Relations," and makes inquiry concerning our Christian testimony and practices (p. 66).

Numerous documents and statements could be cited, but in the fourth study booklet which was prepared for the Friends World Conference held at Oxford in 1952 the following five Affirmations are listed:

1. There is no scientific basis for the myth of race superiority or inferiority.
2. We consider all men the children of our loving Father, and therefore, brothers one of another.

3. We believe in the dignity of human personality. (No untouchability or segregation.)
4. Recognizing differences in capacity among individuals, we still believe all men deserve equal opportunity to develop to the limit of individual ability.
5. We cannot recognize racial discrimination as either necessary or right.

III. QUESTIONS WHICH DISTURB NORTH CAROLINA FRIENDS

WHAT IF NEGROES SHOULD COME TO MEETING?

It may well be that some Sunday morning a number of Negroes may present themselves at our meetings for worship. Some Friends seem to be quite disturbed at this prospect, forgetting that the New Testament Church was multi-racial in nature, and forgetting that the Apostles were not upset because persons of different languages and races shared in the experience of Pentecost, and in the marvelous outpouring of God's Spirit under the preaching of Peter. (See Acts 1)

Perhaps it would be helpful for us to consider the following sentence taken from a resolution adopted February 1, 1961, by the North Carolina Council of Churches: "A church must realize it is the house of God and not a private club." This statement seems to be in keeping with the words of Jesus when He said, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations!'"

Meetings on Ministry and Counsel and Monthly Meetings, if they are in a mood to think calmly and clearly together, might well consider this event in advance of its actual occurrence. In this way the Mind of Christ can be sought in the atmosphere and attitude of worship. The ushers can then be instructed concerning their actions if and when colored persons appear at the meeting for worship.

We offer some suggestions to be examined and weighed in the light of Christ, and applied insofar as they are felt to be in keeping with Christian ideals. 1. When colored persons appear at the meeting for worship, do not pass judgment on their motives. 2. Remember the Golden Rule of our Lord. Treat them with exactly the same courtesy and respect that you would be pleased to receive at any other church. 3. Seat them wherever seats are available as you would any other visitors. (See James 2:1-9) 4. Welcome them into the worship experience; and when you pray, say "Our Father . . ."

The basic, underlying question at this point is this: Is the Church a social institution which may set its own requirements for membership, or is it a Divine Institution for which God has set the requirements for membership?

SCHOOL INTEGRATION

A second question which is disturbing North Carolina Friends is school integration. This is indeed a tremendous problem, and it will probably not be completely solved for many years to come.

The first thing to remember is that it is a waste of time to debate the issue. The Supreme Court's decision was based upon the fundamental ideals of the Constitution of the United States. As good citizens it is our duty to use our influence constructively so that the coming of more integration in the schools will not give rise to such ugly situations as occurred in Little Rock and New Orleans. Friends should be diligent in using their "ministry of reconciliation." Parents also have the responsibility of teaching their children to show a Christian respect for the dignity and worth of human personality at all times.

The Supreme Court was wise in not requiring immediate mass integration of the whole school system at once. Our "separate but equal" schools have been separate, but not equal in many communities. It seems that integration should proceed in such ways and in such measures as can be achieved without detriment to our highest school standards. The primary problems, and perhaps the greatest problems, may lie in trying to raise the level of many sub-standard schools as a necessary preliminary step to increasing integration.

In all probability we are putting a disproportionate amount of attention on the school problem. In many areas of the state, the basic problem is economic and cultural in nature. Until fundamental ills in these areas are remedied, mass integration of children in the schools will be of little value in correcting the gross injustices of our society.

In the meantime, there is no need for hysteria. Here and there where Negro children are attending predominantly white schools in North Carolina, no disorder has occurred. In years to come it will seem to be the most natural thing in the world, and doubtless many people will look back and wonder why they were so emotionally disturbed in the first place.

INTER-MARRIAGE

Although Moses and other great leaders in our Judeo-Christian heritage married across racial lines, our present social structure makes the intermarriage of whites and Negroes highly inadvisable.

There is no New Testament commandment bearing directly on this problem, but we do know that with race prejudice operating in full force in our communities, a mixed marriage would be fraught with

difficulties and heartbreak. The children of such a marriage would perhaps suffer most. In their innocence they would be unacceptable in the community, and perhaps the subjects of cruel scorn and ridicule. In many parts of the world people of differing racial backgrounds intermarry with no social stigma involved. This is not true, however, in our society; and it is the part of wisdom not to move in directions which would bring inevitable grief and suffering.

With these strong sanctions in operation, there is not likely to be any increase in intermarriage in our state, even with more integration of schools and other community activities. Observation indicates that the average citizen of the South is unduly alarmed at this point. There is little or no increase in intermarriage in areas where schools have been integrated for a long time. In fact, most mixed-race births occurred in the South prior to the Civil War in the slavery period. There have been comparatively few since that time.

In most discussions, the intermarriage issue is introduced for the purpose of stopping rational and reasonable thinking. The question is commonly used to raise emotional blocks, and to mislead calm and constructive thinking on one of the most urgent and critical issues of our time.

THINGS I CAN DO PERSONALLY

(Ideas gleaned from here and there)

1. Each day I can include in my prayer some person or family who has reason to distrust or dislike white Americans. For example, it may be a Negro girl who cannot get nurse-training although she qualifies in everything but color. Or it may be a man who did not receive justice in court, or who does not have a fair opportunity to earn a living for his family.
2. I can refrain from using careless or uncomplimentary terms when speaking of Negroes. I can refuse to tell or listen to jokes which are discourteous to other races. In a kindly way I can point out that such things are not in accord with the Golden Rule.
3. Sometimes I can stop and try to put myself in the place of a Negro who is refused common courtesy or fair treatment, just to develop understanding and sympathy. I can watch for opportunities to show kindness and courtesy.
4. Each day I can study the teachings of Jesus and pray to be led more fully into His Spirit. I can say, "What would Jesus think, -say, -do?"
5. I can treat employed persons as Christians should — with fairness and justice, with courtesy and sincere respect. I can work toward improving economic opportunities for underprivileged minorities.

6. Sometimes, in a very tactful way, I can discuss with my friends the unfairness of the discrimination practices in my community. I can make my influence felt in public affairs, always in kindness and boldness, but never in arrogance.
7. I can vote for public officials who will work toward better human relations, and support with my money and my prayers such agencies of Friends as are working specifically in the field of human relations.
8. I can read and study widely so as to be sufficiently well informed to answer helpfully when contempt or ridicule of foreign-born or non-white people is expressed.
9. I can remember always that I am a child of a Father who has many different children whom He loves as much as He loves me. I can seek to live and associate with them as He would have me do. When I pray I can say sincerely, "OUR FATHER . . ."
10. I can teach my children ideals of Christian respect and courtesy.

UNOFFICIAL QUERIES

1. Have we made any attempt to understand the feelings and attitudes of the Negro Christians in our communities?
2. Because of our failure to meet with the Negro Christians, have we caused them to fear and distrust us?
3. Would it be advisable for our Meeting on Ministry and Counsel to meet with a committee of Christian Negroes in our neighborhood and in the spirit of brotherhood discuss the problems of human relationships?