

It has really happened! We were turned away from church today.

I thought there must have been some mistake when three Sundays ago two of your young men were denied the privilege of worshipping in a Christian Church. Perhaps they had gone to testify or demonstrate. Perhaps there had been a scene. But they are splendid young men. David Tatske is a Disciple student at Eureka College, planning to enroll in seminary. Paul Kendall is a Presbyterian minister's son, graduated from Wooster College and enrolled at Union Theological Seminary. They are in Clarksdale participating with some twenty five others in the Mississippi "summer project". Fine Kids! Each a credit to the home and church and college from which they come.

That was three weeks ago. Perhaps if a minister should accompany them—a Christian minister and his wife—things would be different. The local pastor assured me in private conversation that we would hardly be made welcome, but we would no doubt be permitted to worship. He himself would be gone, to accept another pastorate.

We were met at the front steps by two men, one of whom introduced himself by name as an Elder in the church, and produced a prepared document which he proceeded to read. The other excused himself and went in. There would be no preaching, but Communion was about to begin. The statement had quotations from Senator Eastland and others—"The Negroes themselves took the initiative in providing their own churches.....the people are proud of Mississippi.....Mississippi is going to run its own affairs and that includes the church." We declined to stay longer, so we exchanged names and left—turned away from Communion in one of our own Christian Churches. So with bitterness in our hearts we went to a Negro church, an integrated church which would receive white strangers to worship with them. We were unaccustomed to the service. The ways of the church were strange and different, and I was ill-prepared for worship. But I found myself with the others praying, or chanting, the Lord's Prayer. And when we came to the part about "forgiving as we forgive" the bitterness left me and I could feel like a Christian again. As a matter of fact, I was shortly summoned to the platform and told I should "get ready to preach." As the pastor said in good Baptist conviction, "You thought you were going to the white Christian Church this morning, but the Lord knew you were coming here to us."

It was not my intention to embarrass anyone by disturbing a worship service or waving a racial flag. We had attended church in the deep south two weeks before, and had been warmly welcomed, only the pastor suspecting who we might be. Other pastors can verify my attitude of Christian concern for the deep issues which trouble us. Surely this prepared statement does not represent the thinking of the entire congregation at Clarksdale, that everyone there would sanction the turning away of a minister and his wife and two pre-seminary students from the doors of the church. I cannot believe that all the people of the white south would to that extent put their sectional loyalties above their Christian belief and witness. Somewhere we must find people who are Christians first, not Iowans or Mississippians or northerners or southerners. Whatever our differences, we have one Lord, and we are brothers in spite of everything. I understand that some of our young people have been permitted to worship in the Methodist and Presbyterian churches here.

Perhaps I needed this experience of being turned away from Communion. Millions of my brothers live under this rejection every day of their lives. Perhaps I know a little better now what it is like.

—Fraser A. Thomason