

Aug. 8, 1966

FOUR DAYS FOR FREEDOM

On August 1, 1966, I went with a minister from Newark, New Jersey, and a young college friend of his to participate for four days with Negroes in Grenada (pronounced Gre - NAY - da) County, Mississippi, in their demands for the right to vote and the desegregation of public facilities in their county.

My involvement resulted from a steadily growing sympathy for the Civil Rights movement and a chance remark. Rev. Blaine Cragg, pastor of Roseville Presbyterian Church, in Newark, which has a half-Negro, half-Caucasian membership, had agreed to go to Grenada as an official representative of the New Jersey Synod of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., a denomination which is investing heavily in the Movement and whose leaders wished to lend support and encouragement to the Negroes of Grenada County.

I am a member, with Blaine, of a small group that meets for fellowship and prayer each week in Newark. At our July 26 meeting Blaine announced that he would be gone the following week and told us why. Automatically I replied, "I wish I were going with you," little thinking that I would. When Blaine pressed me to join him I had to admit that I both wanted to go and didn't want to. My sympathies were with the movement, but the element of personal risk was quite real, as was the inconvenience that would be involved. But I agreed to pray about it. Three obstacles stood in the way. I did not have the money needed for the trip, the airline strike was in full swing and there were no reservations to be had, and I was due to read final proofs on the September Faith at Work magazine Tuesday morning. To participate in Grenada I would need to leave Monday.

On Saturday morning the magazine proofs arrived -- three days early -- and were dispensed with. Later that morning I learned that someone had contributed the money for my trip. So on Monday I went to the airport to take my chance on getting on one of the four American Airline flights scheduled to fly to Memphis, Tennessee, though I had no reservation. I bought my ticket, took my place in the standby line and half an hour later was aboard the first flight to Memphis. So I must record that throughout this experience I felt a quiet confidence that God had arranged it.

This confidence had been growing since Saturday with a direct answer to a question I kept asking, "What is the point in my going? What can I do down there that will help?" I turned to a favorite passage in the Bible, Matthew's account of the last judgment, where nations are divided between sheep and goats on the basis of their compassion for "the least of these my brethren." I was struck by Jesus' words in Matthew 25:35,36: "I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, naked and you clothed me". (You met the needs you were capable of meeting.) But then He says, "I was in prison and you came to me." Those words leaped off the page. "The Negroes of Mississippi are in prison," I said to myself. "I do not know that I can do anything for them, but I can go to them. That is all God is asking, but He clearly is asking that." From that moment on I sensed that I would be making the trip, and that I had sufficient reason for doing so. So Monday night through Thursday night, August 4, were spent living in the Negro community and participating in every possible way with them in their movement for equality. I would like to share some of the experiences and convictions that resulted from these four privileged days.

Why Grenada?

First of all let me fill in a bit of back ground so that you can understand the significance of the protest in Grenada, a sleepy little town in north central Mississippi about which I knew nothing until last week. As you may recall James Meredith, the Negro who first broke the color barrier at the University of Mississippi, announced, in June, his intention of walking from Memphis to Jackson, a distance of 225 miles, to demonstrate to his fellow Negroes that things have changed in the South and that they need no longer fear reprisal from the white man. On the second day of his march Meredith was shot and injured. As a result several of the Civil Rights organizations converged on Mississippi to take up the march, notably Dr. Martin Luther King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference. What began as an individual demonstration became a mass movement.

The New York Times, on July 9, reported, "Grenada is the spot where the recent march started by James H. Meredith met its first enthusiastic welcome from local Negroes." As a result Dr. King and local Negro leaders presented to the city administration demands for desegregation and registration of Negro voters. Apparently in an effort to avoid publicity -- anything that would besmirch the fair name of Grenada -- the city fathers acceded to all the requests. Registration was opened to Negroes and over 1000 signed up to vote. Public facilities -- washrooms, restaurants and theatres -- were opened to them, but civil rights leaders were sufficiently suspicious that they threatened to return if it was discovered that any of these concessions had been made in bad faith.

As a result of the surprising enthusiasm of the Negroes, local leaders organized the Grenada County Freedom Movement, with Rev. S. T. Cunningham, of Bellflower Baptist Church as its president. In a day or two -- as soon as the marchers went on down the road and the glare of publicity was removed -- white leaders reneged on the concessions they had made. It was discovered that none of the voter registrations was complete -- that it had been done in bad faith and would have to be done all over again if the Negroes were to vote in the city.

On learning this civil rights leaders came back in force to Grenada. Among them were SNCC (Stokely), CORE, and SCLC leaders, vying for leadership. Both SNCC and CORE have become much more militant than Dr. King's SCLC, which advocates non-violence, alliance with sympathetic whites, and Christian love as accompaniments to its direct action pressure tactics. It was in Grenada that the cry for "black power" had first been sounded by Stokely Carmichael of SNCC, one week before.

What might have become a struggle for power between these groups was quickly and decisively solved by the local Grenada County Freedom Movement. They requested SCLC to assist them and asked SNCC and CORE to get out, stating in no uncertain terms their affinity for non-violence and Christian love. For this I am thankful, for I can only identify with the Christian element in the civil rights struggle.

And so it was to Grenada we came, a town of 7000 in a county of 14000, half-white, half-Negro, caught in the backwash of the Meredith March -- a town where Negroes for the first time had been aroused to the possibility of shaking off the invisible chains of white domination and where all the bitter intransigence of the white community came boiling to the surface. In Mississippi, the last stronghold of white supremacy in the United States, Grenada was one of the toughest strongholds. In twelve years since the Supreme Court instructed the nation to desegregate its schools Grenada had not made so much as a gesture toward integration.

At the time when we went to Grenada this sleepy town was suddenly one of the "hottest spots" in the movement -- along with Yazoo City and Bogaloussa, Louisiana -- though white citizens were stunned by the turn of events and kept asking, "Why has this happened to us? Our Negroes are contented. If it weren't for outside agitators none of this would have occurred."

Our four days in Grenada were quiet ones. There were no shootings, though out on the county roads, urging sharecroppers to vote, we were twice threatened. (And three weeks before, two men with a machine gun opened fire on three justice department men as they drove up to Bellflower Baptist Church [the headquarters for the movement, where we ate our meals and received our instructions each day.] Fortunately the justice men saw the gun and dropped to the ground behind a car. Only the car was shot up. Local police arrested the two men with the submachine gun, but the grand jury found no evidence and refused to indict them.)

Neither were there any arrests during our four days in Grenada. There had been fifty in the previous two weeks, all on false charges, and five Negroes were still in jail. We learned that constant harrassment was one way in which the white power structure sought to discourage the movement. Intricate rules govern marching and picketing, and whenever the police decided to move in they could allege violations of all the rules. Excessive bonds would be set: three hundred dollars for obstructing traffic (when two Negro teen-age girls stood innocently talking downtown, for instance), and then a cat-and-mouse game of refusing bond offers would follow until the girls had spent five lonely days in jail.

The danger most real to us "outsiders" was the danger of arrest and the consequent involvements that could have detained us and tied us up for days or weeks. So it was the police we feared most during our stay in Grenada. Within twenty minutes of my arrival they had stopped to ask who I was and what I was doing in town and I found myself being followed and watched from then on.

What did we accomplish?

First of all, we gave encouragement. During our four days it became quite apparent to us that the white citizens were right in what they were saying. Without outside leadership there would be no protest -- no marches and picketing. There had to be leaders and organizational backing from outside the community, not because the local Negroes lacked the desire for equality, but because they were so completely at the mercy of the white community that they could not have organized and carried off a protest successfully. So the SCLC staff (some ten or twelve of them while we were there) were essential.

One of the important factors was that SCLC means Dr. Martin Luther King -- a name revered among most southern Negroes and feared by the white community because he commands the kind of national prominence that can bring unfavorable publicity to any offending community. Wherever Dr. King goes, TV camera crews and newsmen accompany him. Unfavorable publicity is a strong deterrent to any retaliatory actions.

SCLC brought to Grenada staff members and tactics fashioned by months of experience in other trouble spots such as Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma. Their first move was to present 51 demands to the city officials, all of which were refused on the grounds that "demands, threats, and intimidation are not proper, appropriate, or acceptable means of accomplishing anything, and any and all such tactics will be ig-

nored." Hosea Williams, SCLC's man in charge of voter registration, assigned a remarkable young Negro, nineteen-year-old Leon Hall, to lead the task force in Grenada that was to rally the Negro community and seek to win the concessions due them as citizens.

The strategy adopted was to impose a "blackout" on all white-operated stores and to gain the cooperation of the Negroes so that such measures would effectively force the white community to grant concessions. Rallies each night draw two or three hundred Negroes, and serve to generate enthusiasm and raise money for day-to-day expenses. Each rally is followed by an organized march and public peeting, usually in the city square. Ringed by city police and state troopers the Negroes sing and then cheer Leon Hall as he talks to the white citizens and repeats the Negro demands. For Negroes who have never in their lives been permitted to talk back to a white man this is therapy of the highest order. They are hearing one of their own talk as they have often wanted to talk and are learning that it can be done. As a result they stand a little straighter and think better of themselves.

The white community in Grenada apparently believes quite sincerely that the freedom movement represents only a small minority of the Negroes. But we were assured by Negro ministers that it represents 98% of their race. (The other 2% apparently prefer the security of the status quo to the responsibility of freedom.) It is my sincere conviction that the average white Southerner is unable to discover the Negro's true feelings because the Negro is too fearful to express them.

Already the freedom movement has brought white reprisals, which are what every Negro fears. A number of Negroes have lost their jobs because they, or a relative of theirs, participated in a march. Needy Negroes have been dropped from public welfare. And the week we were there a program called HELP, which dispensed surplus food provided by the federal government to 4800 needy citizens in the county, 4000 of them Negro, was closed without announcement or explanation. These are pressures that make it virtually impossible for Negroes to protest without outside assistance and publicity.

It is frightening to think what may happen in Grenada if the boycott is broken and the movement defeated. Without outside pressure and publicity the Whites might easily bring such economic and physical pressures to bear that the Negroes' lot will be worse than ever before.

But is it necessary for white ministers from up north to lend encouragement? We came to feel, while we were in Grenada, that we were the most hated people in town. While we invoked deep hostility from many whites who called us communists, and "bastard preachers", we felt that our presence was essential to the Negro community which needs to know that there are white people sympathetic to their aspirations, without which assurance the movement might swing even more completely to a black nationalist, "hate white" stance. So we felt ourselves a reconciling force, to the Negroes at least, if not to the whites.

Second, we participated. We joined the staff and their volunteer force in whatever was the order of the day. If it was to work through a neighborhood canvassing the adult population and preparing them for voter registration we went along. "I'm Rev. Howard," I would say, "I'm working with Dr. Martin Luther King to encourage you to register. I came all the way down from the North because I believe things are changing in our country. But if things are really going to change you've got to them by voting." We'd get their names and addresses, inform them that next week / change

federal registrars would be in the county, and see if they headed a ride to the registration booth.

If the morning's plans were to picket downtown we would fall in line and carry an appropriate placard while white people either ignored us or gathered in little clusters to taunt us and call us dirty names.

Each night we joined the march, following precisely the terms of the federal court injunction which forces Grenada to permit peaceable march and assembly -- walking silently two abreast in groups of twenty up to the city square, then back to the church, accompanied every step of the way by patrol cars from which armed troopers observed our every movement and with amazing self-control resisted their obvious desire to "bust heads" and disperse the crowd.

On Wednesday and Thursday nights Blaine Cragg and I were privileged to bring the message at the rally, each of which is a "gospel meeting" combining religious fervor with the struggle for freedom. As we prepared to speak whole sections of the Bible were read in a new light. For Blaine, the march of the children of Israel found an amazing parallel to the Grenada march. Suggs Ingram, the unreasonable white sheriff, became Pharaoh. The grumblings in the wilderness when food was low paralleled the deprivations in Grenada when shopping is difficult and relief is cut off. Complaints against Moses' leadership paralleled the tensions between staff members and the peoples' temptation to quit the struggle. To me the tenth chapter of Matthew came alive. I could put myself more readily in the shoes of the disciples as they went out two-by-two as sheep among wolves, to be persecuted and rejected bringing not peace but a sword. I do not think I shall ever again read that chapter without reliving my own brief experience in Grenada.

We did one other thing while in Grenada which we alone were capable of doing. We sought out white ministers, asked them to help us see the situation through their eyes, and asked how we might promote communication between whites and blacks. Our discoveries were significant.

We found a young enlightened thoroughly Christian minister in the Presbyterian, U.S., church. He told us an amazing story. His denomination this past year ruled that no one is to be turned away from attendance at any service or membership in any Presbyterian Church on grounds of race. His session voted to concur in that action and welcome any Negro who might attend the Grenada Church. Then came the Meredith march, and while the minister was on vacation the session rescinded its action. When the minister returned he said to them, "You realize that you are violating the law of the church."

"We realize that."

"And that I'll have to report you to Presbytery."

"Yes."

He reported his session's action forthwith and the Presbytery voted to sustain the session in their stand. Now this minister must decide whether to appeal to synod. So strong is the opposition to Negroes and to being "pressured" by them to act justly!

The Methodist minister gave us a warm friendly hearing. He, too, is an enlightened and dedicated Christian, a Mississippian who chose to stay in the state and work for justice and reconciliation. He feels that a generation will have to die before significant changes in attitude occur, but he has great hopes for his younger men and his own opportunities to teach them if he is able to stay there. He offers lit-

the help to the immediate situation but within the realities of his situation is hopeful that he can be a part of the ultimate solution.

This Methodist minister urged us to come back for coffee in the afternoon, this time in the informality of his home, and when we arrived we found his wife, the Presbyterian minister, and another Methodist minister who heads up his church's social action group in Northern Mississippi. We had a most enjoyable time exploring the possibilities of communicating with Negro leaders and from this meeting were able to convey to the Negro leadership the fact that there were right-minded whites in the community who were working to counteract bigotry and prejudice.

These white ministers were ambivalent in their feelings about our presence in town. The first response to "What can we do to help?" was "Go back home and pray for us." But they did not all agree. Two of the men felt that outside pressure was necessary and that without the Meredith march nothing would have begun to happen.

Our last visit was to First Baptist Church, the largest church in what is known as a Baptist town. The pastor was away but we spoke with the Christian education director who informed us that the movement did not represent the aspirations of the Negroes, that it was a known fact that there were communists fomenting it, and that outsiders like us ought to get out and let Southerners handle their own problems. They were willing, he said, to accept Negroes as Christian brothers but not to integrate them into the community nor to worship with them in the same church.

I had not gone to Mississippi feeling like an "outsider". For one thing I have spent fifteen of my adult years in the south and I doubt if there is any argument in the southerners' arsenal I have not heard already. But these fifteen years counted for nothing apparently. I was an enemy, and possibly a communist. But though I am a Yankee by disposition and geography, I still do not qualify as an "outsider" in the south. This is one nation and we are interdependent on each other in a myriad of ways. For one thing, the problems caused in the south because the Negro has not been educated and accepted into the economy are costing the federal government great sums of money for education and welfare. Mississippi draws more federal assistance per capita than any other state. Some of that money comes from my taxes, and so I feel that Mississippi's problems are my problems. There are no "outsiders" in a nation as interrelated as ours. We are our brothers' keepers, and we need each other in the solution of our mutual problems.

Third, our understanding was increased. Brief as our stay was it was sufficient to introduce me to a new experience. I lived in the Negro community, in a dilapidated house in the country, with no running water or plumbing, in a typical Negro home ruled by a grandmother whose husband has long ago left her, whose children are in Chicago, and three of whose grandchildren are back in Mississippi for the summer. What I have many times viewed from the outside I now became a part of for a few days.

Inevitably, because we sided with the Negroes against a belligerent white community, we were the objects of scorn and suspicion. And just as inevitably we saw the world as if we were Negroes. Among them we had nothing to fear. But we never knew how white people would react to us, particularly the police.

1) I came to see how the Negroes fear the white man, particularly the sheriff and the police force, who are so often the instrument not of justice but of intimidation in maintaining white supremacy. I came ~~stay~~ wondering how the Negro will ever

learn respect for law, when law enforcement officers so obviously misuse their power to keep Negroes "in their place".

2) I came to see how deeply "the system" of white supremacy is entrenched, how determined the Mississippians have been not to grant equality to Negroes. The evidence is in the multiplication of forces that are required to force compliance with federal civil rights legislation.

Federal registrars are necessary to guarantee fair registration. Justice department lawyers are assigned to hear complaints and press legal suits where justified. The NAACP Defense Fund men are available when help is needed to raise bond or to defend Negroes charged with offenses. The President's Commission helps with legal assistance since there is not a single Negro lawyer in Grenada County. Forty-eight public health officials are kept constantly busy checking the state's hospitals, hotels, and restaurants to insure compliance with Title 6 of the 1965 Civil Rights Act. To say nothing of the ever-present F.B.I. and the news services, CBS - TV visited Grenada the week we were there to check up on progress being made in Civil Rights and to interview Leon Hall.

3) I came to see the damage that has been done the Negro through slavery and discrimination. Perhaps the most deplorable single fact in this whole depressing situation is that not only has the white man looked down on the Negro; he has taught the Negro to look down on himself. In Grenada we saw Negroes at their worst -- dirty, illiterate, primitive -- the result not of racial characteristics but of centuries of inhuman treatment and conditioning.

The Southerner's treatment of the Negro, at its best, has been a genuine liking for certain individuals among them that has seen to it that they were cared for. But even at its best such treatment has been patronizing, denying any Negroes equal respect with whites, always keeping the Negro in his place -- at the back door, scratching his head and saying "Yassuh," doing the hard, dirty jobs, and being paid half as much for an equal amount of labor.

At its worst, the Southerner's treatment of the Negro has been brutal, irrational intimidation, with frequent beatings and jailings, and occasional murders for which the guilty party is never punished.

As a result the Southern Negro has lived in fear -- essentially fear of the white man, who has the upper hand, who is never wrong, and who cannot be successfully opposed. And he has lived in self-abhorrence, thinking of himself as something less than fully human.

The stark paradox in all this is that such treatment has been administered by the nicest of people! Surely there is no class of people more charming and gracious and hospitable than the Southerners who worship God faithfully on Sunday and sincerely believe "we are treating our Negroes well."

4) I came to see how abused and misused the message of Christianity is in a situation like the one in Grenada.

To the Negro Christianity has offered solace amid suffering, as is so eloquently expressed in their spirituals. Faith in God has been the Negro's refuge amid injustice, and quite legitimately so. He has been denied the full sonship which is his right in equality with Christians of other races, and to this degree he has been de-

nied the Gospel, but in other respects he has found hope and patience and even a carefree abandon in God.

But what shall we say of the whites who have professed allegiance to Jesus Christ but have refused to accept Negroes as their equals in the Christian community, whose faith is not permitted to challenge their deeply ingrained prejudices nor their fiercely defended self-interests? Who are more concerned about the value of their property than the freedom of other individuals? Whose Christianity seems all too often to be a thin veneer of piety only partially hiding a culture of white economic and social supremacy and denying radical Christian obedience.

5) Finally, I am coming to see that the ultimate solution to our racial problems can only come through a recovery and application of a Christian faith that has integrity.

The most interesting man I met in Grenada is a native of New Jersey, in his fifties, on the staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, whose name is Jim. Following the break-up of Jim's marriage two years ago he started on an intensive search for God. Whether this accounts for his joining the freedom movement I don't know, but I do know that he has found God in a deeply personal and significant way. He shared with me many of his experiences in Selma and throughout the South, and then he said, "I'm convinced that there is no possibility of reconciliation outside the Church."

I agree with Jim. Deeper than social and economic integration, necessary as this is and worthy of our fighting for, is the need for true reconciliation between the races. But is this possible apart from reconciliation with God? Prejudice and self-interest run too deep for any superficial treatment. What is needed is Christian faith that runs deep enough to challenge our prejudices and pretensions. It will not be enough any longer to preach a Gospel that merely insures our own personal safety, security, and happiness.

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August 8, 1966