

“Desegregation, Integration, and the Beloved Community”

[*September 1966*]

[*Boston, Mass.*]

In discussing the subject assigned me by the editor of this series, I am aware that I shall be working in an area that has been well nigh exhaustively mined. It is my purpose to analyze the significance of desegregation against the background of segregation in American society, to interpret integration in the social context created by segregation, to assess the meaning of the “beloved” community against such a total background.

Segregation is an act of power. Despite all of the niceties of interpretation in which various aspects of social evolution are given their due, the sober fact remains that in segregation we see the exercise of raw power by one group of people over the lives of another group of people. The most radical distinction between two such groups is the fact that one has in its hands the controls or tools by which their position can be maintained, while the other is essentially lacking in such tools. Of such is the historic ground of segregation in American society. Segregation per se need not have a negative connotation. When germs or bacteria are isolated for study or control, when persons with communicable diseases are quarantined in a city hospital, when the library for children is separated from the section used by adults, and so on—all these are expressions of segregation. In our society, however, the term is reserved for a special set of circumstances. Ask any man on the street what he thinks of when he hears the word segregation. He will tell you that something involving the relationship between Negroes and white people is the first image that comes to mind.

To segregate means to separate. In the social context which composes the climate of American society the term itself carries with it an element that is involuntary. Hence it is an act of power exercised over the lives of people who are essentially in a weak position. Such separation has become so ingrained in the structure of our society that it is guaranteed by economic, political, social, and religious sanctions. The sanctions are so much a part of society that to tamper with them is to throw the society itself into confusion. It is for this reason that any mere change of attitude toward segregation on the part of the general public most often seems to be futile and irrelevant. The attack on segregation in order to be meaningful and effective has to involve revolution, social upheaval. It is against this kind of background that desegregation must be understood and discussed.

In a rather restricted sense it may be said that the Supreme Court decision of May, 1954 precipitated social revolution in America in the midst of which more than a decade later we are still involved. I quote from my essay published in 1965:

“The crisis set in motion by the Supreme Court Decision of 1954 introduced a radically new situation. To dishonor segregation has been pre-empted by Negroes as a right, not as a whim or a private prerogative. This decision, more than any other which the Court has rendered in the area of Civil Rights, created an entirely new issue for the South particularly. Why? Because it declared segregation itself to be unconstitutional. It made its declaration concerning the most critical seedbed for the perpetuation of the Southern pattern: the tax-supported public schools. It dealt with the fundamental responsibility of a society to educate the young, who in turn would become the responsible adults of the future. This is the taproot of the society and here it was declared that all children must be free to learn to live together with easy access to one another while the mind is developing and the heritage of the culture is being transmitted. The instinct to

reject the decision sprang out of the profound awareness that it sounded the death gong for the pattern of segregation in all of its far-flung and complex dimensions.”

Desegregation as applied to public school education is far more difficult to achieve than in other facets of American society. A restaurant maybe “desegregated” by the simple device of serving non-whites. This may cause temporary economic loss and in some instances even complete economic loss; but what happens may not attack the fundamental structure of the society. The mere fact of the cost of meals in a first-class restaurant may itself be a self-regulating guarantor of a limited, exclusive clientele. The same may be true of hotels or motels. In other words, what is involved in desegregating public accommodations may be absorbed without creating more than a ripple on the social stream. This is not to denigrate the significance of it, however; but to desegregate public education attacks the segregated neighborhood on the basis of which public schools are built, the theory being that the child should attend the school in his neighborhood and thereby make the adjustment from home to school more easily facilitated. It means the re-designing of the American city, which calls for re-thinking the total philosophy of city planning and re-distributing the economic units by which city plans are devised and underwritten.

In the Southern states, for a long time, geographically segregated sections of the city more nearly duplicated the social pattern of the larger community than was true in Northern cities. It is for this reason that when the term “ghetto” is used with reference to segregation, it is the northern region of the country that people have in mind. When the term is used with reference to a section of a Southern city, it is a term borrowed from the urban centers of the North. The first time I have heard the term applied to the South was in the discussions growing out of the recent riots in Atlanta, Georgia. This is not to look upon the segregated Southern

community with approval but it is to point out that the segregated section of a Southern city is not quite the same kind of “isolated system” that the Negro ghetto in the northern city is. Segregation in public education may mean very different things in different sections of the country. In the South it has meant the formal acceptance of separate education as a part of the way of life. It has meant the formal acceptance of separate codes of behavior, radical differentiation in the per capita cost of education favorable to the white child, which in turn meant poorer facilities, inadequate teaching—all by clear design; hence, the question of desegregation involved a complete reorientation of the mentality of the South. The Supreme Court decision of 1954 could vary easily therefore be interpreted as a basic attack upon the total social structure of the white South. The desegregation of the public schools became a symbol of the destruction of the meaning of Southern white society. This society was maintained by a complex set of economic, social, political, and religious values.

In an editorial that appeared in the Richmond, Virginia News Leader as quoted in Time magazine June 13, 1955, the following excerpts appeared:

“From the moment that abominable decision was handed down, two broad courses only were available to the South. One was to defy the court openly and notoriously; the other was to accept the court’s decision and to combat it by legal means. To defy the court openly would be to enter upon anarchy; the logical end would be a second attempt at secession from the Union. And though the idea is not without merit, it is impossible of execution. We tried that once before.

To acknowledge the court’s authority does not mean that the South is helpless . . . Rather, it is to enter upon a long course of lawful resistance; it is to take lawful advantage of every moment of the law’s delays . . . Let us pledge ourselves to litigate this thing for 50 years. If one

remedial law is ruled invalid, then let us try another; and if the second is ruled invalid, then let us enact a third.”

Nearly twelve years after the Supreme Court decision public education in the South and in large areas of the North remains segregated. The collective will to segregation remains basically intact. Only revolution can break up the foundations of a society sufficiently to bring about a different orientation of the forces that determine the established order. But more than this, during the period of the revolution, hopefully the power concept itself will be so enlarged as to include the power dimension of the Negro community in the South. Here I am not referring to the current unreflective slogan: Black Power. There are signs of this beginning to emerge. I need mention only the potential enfranchisement of Negroes due to more recent civil rights legislation and the economic potential of cooperatives in Mississippi. What remains to be asserted is the use of the economic power and wealth of the Negro community in the South not primarily as separate, competing power but as economic power that for so long has been a silent partner in the social structure of the region. This would mean an entirely new and radical power base affecting the common life of all the people.

Even the voting rights guaranteed by recent federal legislation have an acute role in the power realignment which expresses itself in desegregation. Only indirectly, however, may the ballot become involved in far-reaching changes in the social structure. As long as the pattern of segregation is accepted and is not disturbed by revolutionary forces, it is quite possible to have universal suffrage in the South or North used to guarantee the established order. One need only see what has happened in any region of the country where the vote is free and open. Left to itself, the voting right supports the established structure. Unless some other forces are at work which disturb power and controls, then power and social controls use the ballot as a viable instrument

in their hands. But given the threat to power as first precipitated by the attack on segregation in the public schools, the role of the ballot becomes crucial. Now the vote may, with discrimination, choose public officials who must be responsible to new power structures, political in character, which have emerged. One of the issues in the South, therefore, is to crush this new power potential, the exercise of which could become so devastating to the system. This is the basis of the economic reprisals levied upon the Negro community in various southern cities in an effort to nullify political rights. It is my judgment that all such reprisals are temporary because of the interdependence of the Negro and white communities. I may be in error.

I turn now to the question of desegregation in the North. All manifestations of segregation in the North are peripheral in comparison with the Negro ghetto as the hard core of experienced segregation. It is inconvenient, aggravating, and maddening to have to deal with segregation in public accommodations whenever it occurs. The point of such segregation is always the same—to force the Negro back into the Negro ghetto. The power controls in the North as far as black and white relations are concerned revolve around the stability of the ghetto as a permanent social unit. One does not wonder that the ghetto is so crucial in the effort to desegregate institutions in the North. As has been remarked, there is a difference between the northern ghetto and the segregated Negro community in the South. The former tends to be a psychologically isolated system; in one sense both are “closed systems.” The closed system of the South is by formal, deliberate, open declaration. It is generally accepted as a normal part of the social structure. It is not regarded as dirt under the rug, nor is it generally a source of hidden guilt. Because of this, efforts are made many times to improve it within the established zones of agreement. In other words, there is often on the part of the controls of power in a southern city the tendency to recognize limited responsibility for the life of the Negro community. Any

improvement in the larger power community is often dimly reflected in simple improvement in the Negro community. For instance, a school bond that nets the cost of a new white high school most often includes some symbol of improvement in the Negro high school. Let me be understood here. It is far from my intention to have my words construed as condoning the segregated community in the South. It is important to delineate the difference in order that the enormity and the tragedy of the facts of segregation in American society be sensed.

In the South, any deviation from the pattern of segregation involves a formal shift in the etiquette of power. It does not matter how minor the deviation may be. (This excludes all matters of the ancient, undercover sexual mingling.) The northern ghetto can be ignored and forgotten by the white community so long as there are no eruptions that spill over to disturb the common life. Every care is exercised to see to it that this happens. In a sense it is rimmed by power representation in police and other regulatory authority. The controls tend to be frozen; even the political structure is annexed to the larger political structure as a social unit. When the mandate of the Supreme Court decision affecting public education was given, it was generally regarded as something which was aimed exclusively at the South. When the revolution, which was in part precipitated by the decision, hit the American scene it too was generally regarded as applicable to the South exclusively. Out of this unreality a new term emerged: de facto segregation. It is a term that one does not hear in the South. It applies in its use to the form that segregation takes in the North and explicitly defines the basic immorality and dishonesty of the systems of power in the North. Applied to public education, it points out by definition the guise under which segregation has functioned in northern communities. By custom and by power-manipulation various minorities have been confined to geographic areas in which certain public facilities, such as free education, have been provided. The Supreme Court decision of 1954 cast a searchlight

upon this phenomenon. In substance, it insisted that a public school in which most of the pupils were of a particular ethnic group was in violation of the letter and the spirit of the act.

Immediately, school boards were faced with a new kind of social responsibility. They were called upon to justify the public schools as they had been functioning for generations or to make far-reaching and radical changes. In the cold light of the Supreme Court's decision the vast majority of the public schools in the North were in fact segregated institutions. They conformed to the basic requirement that the state provide free public education for its children. Such public institutions were usually in the heart of the ghetto and suffered from the same kind of neglect that characterized the official attitude towards the ghetto generally. By a curious kind of ratiocination the ghetto itself, until recently, was not acknowledged to be segregated. When school boards or school committees across the country were first presented with demands that the schools conform to the 1954 ruling, the first and most immediate reaction was that the schools were not segregated. The reply to that reaction brought into the language the term de facto segregation.

In order to desegregate public education in the North, a terrific power struggle ensued. The antagonists were those who sought to defend the established order and who saw that if the pattern were changed, the foundations of the society would not only be disturbed but would have to be reshuffled. It would mean the beginning of the end of the confinement of a group within the ghetto. For if children were brought out of the ghetto by buses into other neighborhoods, the way would be clear for their parents to begin establishing homes in areas in which their children were going to school. This in turn would upset the orthodoxy of the real estate fraternity, which would force a revision in the ethics and the psychology of the money lenders responsible for the floating of mortgages. Further, such a development would alter the boundaries of the religious



parish, and non-white persons would conceivably begin knocking at the doors of the all- white churches seeking membership. Living in the ghetto would become optional, meaning that it would no longer be a ghetto. Once such a development began to take place, the hard core of living in the ghetto would be exposed—the unemployed and the unemployable, the rat-infested tenements, and the exorbitant rentals. In fine, the putrid, contaminated cesspool of the slum would now threaten the social health of the wider community. Slum clearance would become the concern of the total community for its own health rather than a gesture of economic benevolence. All of this could be done to the real advantage of the democratic dogma.

I turn now to a somewhat less detailed discussion of the meaning of integration. In recent times the term has become very popular as a social goal. In the public mind it stands over against segregation and is viewed as the end product of desegregation. The image which it creates generally is one of harmonious relationship between groups, particularly between black and white. Because of this the word is defined in accordance with one's emotional reaction to people different from one's self. Colloquially, it is present when one or more non-white persons become a part of a larger white group. This is called token integration by general usage. In any tight circle of segregation or separation, when one person from a different group becomes a part of it, the social pattern is threatened and challenged. Once the newcomer's presence is regarded as "token" he can be easily isolated within the group and thus his presence becomes a protection to the pattern of segregation by which the character of such a group is determined. On the other hand, the presence of the outsider in the group may be "token" in an entirely different sense. He may be recognized as symbolic of a future pattern of the group. His presence may be used as a "dry run," as someone with whom the group might practice, check, and test a new and different orientation. Such a method has been used often in the past in some private schools, clubs, and

churches. It is expressive of a design and may be the evolving of fresh purpose and intent. Such experimentation, however, presupposes a period of social ease and the absence of widespread pressures in the general environment. But when there is intense pressure upon the group to become inclusive, the term “token” becomes a delaying tactic or strategy. Hence, in many sections of the country it is this latter usage that is most characteristic.

To integrate means to unify, to combine, to become whole, to become one. It cannot be achieved, therefore, by any kind of mechanical rearrangement of persons or rules or regulations. It may be facilitated by changes in policies and regulations — it may be provided for in the structure of organized life in a community or an institution; but integration can never be achieved as an end in itself but must emerge as an experience after the fact of coming together. The damage to the body politic growing out of the ancient patterns of segregation in our society is so profound that the meaning of integration is most often limited to the superficial and mechanical juggling of different kinds of belonging. For instance, it is a commonplace thing for some clergymen to say to me, “At last my church is integrated, we have one Negro family in our membership.” It is quite obvious that often there is an artificial and unreal element in the meaning of integration as applied to institutions in our society.

In fine, integration has two distinct meanings as the term is currently used. In the first it is used as a term contrasted with segregation. It means open and free access to all public accommodations and all units within the society that are in any sense a part of the public domain. It places limitations upon group memberships, insisting that by design such limitations may not define barriers before which the individual by definition or category is excluded. It says that there must be no closed systems which operate automatically with reference to any members of the society. There must be live options in regard to all facilities in which individuals participate.

The mandate is that the options remain open. This is the legal aspect of integration and it is in that sense the goal of the attack upon segregation and de facto segregation through courts of law and policy shifts within the framework of economic and political power. Reduced to a formula, it would read something like this: from segregation to desegregation to integration.

Integration in this limited sense is guaranteed by the political contract under the aegis of which American society lives. Once this is clear and is literal fact, the society is in a position to support the dynamic meaning of integration. As long as it is necessary for individuals in society to defy laws and customs in order to have free and open access to association with each other, the total structure of society will be in active jeopardy. It is in this light that the revolution as manifested in the struggle for civil rights, for open occupancy, for the ballot must be seen.

The second meaning of integration in current usage has to do with the quality of human relations. It is concerned with the private, personal experience of individuals and groups of varied backgrounds as they discover that there is a unity among peoples that can contain and support diversity as an expression of its self. In this sense integration may be a by-product of free and open accommodations—it cannot be legislated or dictated by formal or collective decisions. True, the enactment of legislation guarantees that all accommodations be open to all. But such enactments or laws cannot determine or guarantee the quality of the personal adjustment within the broad range of open privilege.

Because dynamic integration has to do with the individual's total experience in the society, its meaning has to be grounded in the many-sided aspects of the common life. During the years when The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco was being developed, it became increasingly clear that the mere presence of people of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds in the membership did not mean that the church itself was "integrated."

The coming together of people in such institutions must be rooted in natural communal association. They must be able to participate meaningfully in the various phases of their living if their relationship in more formal ways is to be positive and creative. Meaningful experiences of integration between peoples are more compelling than the fears, the inhibitions, the dogmas or the prejudices that divide. If such unifying experiences can be multiplied over an extended time interval, they will be able to restructure the entire fabric of the social context.

The second sense in which the term “integration” is used has direct bearing on the meaning of the “beloved” community. That which makes any community become the beloved community is the quality of the human relations experienced by the people who live within it. The term itself is an abstraction. It becomes concrete in a given time and place in the midst of living human beings. It cannot be brought into being by fiat or by order; it is an achievement of the human spirit as men seek to fulfill their high destiny as children of God. As a dream of the race it has moved in and out on the horizon of human strivings like some fleeting ghost. And yet it always remains to haunt and to inspire men in all ages and all conditions. In some sense it is always vague and the blueprint for it often outmoded before it can be translated into living texture.

The beloved community in the context of our discussion involves the social climate with all that is meant by the dimensions of freedom brought into focus by the cataclysms of the civil rights revolution in which we are engulfed. It sees the revolutionary activity as means, not as ends. Steadfastly, it refuses to separate the means open to revolution from the ends to be achieved by revolution. Because of this radical moral imperative, there are those who insist that the beloved community may not be possible of achievement within the vast decay of our diseased, prejudice-ridden society. This is to say that the contradictions of life are final and

ultimate. I disagree with this position utterly. The presence of the beloved community is always manifesting itself in the lives of people in the very midst of the social decay by which they are surrounded. It begins in the human spirit and moves out into the open independence of the society. Ultimately, the responsibility for its coming to pass rests first upon the shoulders of the individual. Each man must feel personally responsible for bringing it to pass in the society in which he lives and functions.

It must never be forgotten that the whole point of the attack on the evils of segregation for individuals as well as the total society is that the system renders healthy human relations impossible and it robs the individual of the right to live in immediate candidacy for the beloved community. This essential point can be very easily overlooked, forgotten or ignored in the white heat of the long, hot summer, the angry violence of a suburban Cicero or the unbelievable Mississippi sadism of Grenada. The issue at stake is only incidentally, though crucially so, the pattern of civil rights, open occupancy, destruction of ghettos, desegregation of schools, churches, etc. At long last, what is being sought is a way of life that is worth living and a faith in one's self, in others, and in the society that can be honestly and intelligently sustained. And this is what the beloved community is all about. If we fail at this point, it will not very much matter how successful the drives are for the many-sided goals of civil rights or civil liberties for that matter, we will stare at each other across stormy seas, our eyes gleaming with the burning frenzy of our unhappy and exhausted spirits.

It is clear that the process from segregation to integration may carry the society out into the open stretch of realization in which the direction is clearly defined along which mankind may find its way into the experience of the beloved community. The term itself has a soft and sentimental ring. It conjures up into the mind an image of tranquility, peace, and the utter

absence of struggle and of all things that irritate and disturb. But my thought is far from such a utopian surmise. It is a society in which there are no artificial barriers separating man from man or groups from one another—where the precious ingredient in each personality, unique unto itself, may be so honored by his fellows that it will enrich the common life even as it creates its own light in which to stand. As it is with the individual, so will it be for the uniqueness of each group, springing from the deep, searching paths along which it has emerged from the dim past or from some vast political or social catastrophe that cast it up on the shores of history. There will be no hard or critical lines of conformity yielding a glow of sameness over the private or collective landscape but rather will there be new forms and patterns emerging, the blending of which will give to the society as a whole a richness and a stimulation that will make for the general health and well-being. Disagreements and conflicts will be real and germane to the vast undertaking of man's becoming at home in his world and under the eaves of his brother's house.

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