

THE CONNECTION

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Reverend J. Claude Evans and "This Conflict of Race"

by Mike Broome, WSUMC Historian

The "Black Lives Matter" movement and its attendant reexamination of the status of racial justice in our nation are overdue ideas. These ideas have no doubt given rise to the formation of Washington Street Church's Racial Justice Action Team, a strongly led group with the vision "to actively advocate for racial justice within our congregation and community" (WSUMC Racial Justice Action Team "Vision, Mission, and Goals" document, accessed July 31, 2020). Since one of the primary aims of this team is to explore the history of racial justice surrounding our church, it seems fitting to conclude this *The Connection* series with reference to a worship service event that resonates with the work of the RJAT and our congregation's experience with black-white relations.

My wife Charlotte and I were on the verge of becoming Washington Streeters on July 21, 1996, when Reverend J. Claude Evans preached a "replay" sermon recalling his controversial July 27, 1942, message entitled "This Conflict of Race." He came to our pulpit on that day in 1996 at the invitation of our Church and Society Committee. When he finished, the congregation's standing ovation belied the much more negative response of the July 1942 event. The context of this experience is worth a reminder.

When World War II began, the South was slowly recovering from the Great Depression and coping with the ongoing issues of the bigoted Jim Crow era and the revered remembrance of the Lost Cause with respect to race relations. Only a few decades before, "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman had served as governor and

later as a senator from South Carolina. He "was an unabashed and self-proclaimed 'white supremacist' who led South Carolina's notorious red shirts, a paramilitary gang that murdered black people on large and small scales" (SC Information Highway Website, accessed November 22, 2020). His influence was not short term. Another contextual example

was Reverend Samuel Steel, who was appointed to Washington Street Church in 1913. While in some ways progressive, Steel was a product of his generation. "He regularly extolled the Lost Cause in the pulpit . . . and published a monograph while in Columbia entitled, *The South Was Right* (Huff, p. 77). The residue of a social and political system unfavorable to blacks remained in the wings as the young Reverend Claude Evans arrived at Washington Street in 1941.

Evans carved out an impressive career as a clergyman. Born in Anderson, S.C., in 1917, he completed his A.B. at Wofford in 1937 and his B.D. at Duke in 1940, and he received an Honorary D.D. from Wofford in 1957. He completed his graduate study at Union Theological Seminary of New York and the University of Chicago. His church assignments included associate terms at First Methodist in Charlotte,



Rev. J. Claude Evans

N.C., and Washington Street as well as senior positions at other churches in the South Carolina Conference. He was a Navy chaplain during 1944-46. He was editor of the *South Carolina Methodist Advocate* from 1952-57 and served as chaplain of Southern Methodist University in Dallas beginning in 1957.

The Washington Street archives have been fortunate to receive a generous packet of materials from Lowell W. Ross, Esquire, a Seneca attorney who knew Rev. Evans when Mr. Ross was in high school in Walhalla. Rev. Evans passed these writings along to Mr. Ross, who graciously entrusted them to our archives. In this packet, we read a number of life stories from Rev. Evans, including an outline of the controversial 1942 sermon.

One such 1938 story, in summary, involved Rev. Evans's willingness to dive into the Roanoke River to retrieve the body of an unfortunate black fellow who had drowned while fishing. Evans's courage and unhesitating offer to put his Red Cross Senior Life Saver skills to use foreshadow the man who was also willing a few years later to deliver an unpopular but morally important sermon. Evans was successful in locating and pulling up the deceased fisherman, by the way.

On July 27, 1942, the Sunday of the controversial sermon, Rev. Dr. John Owen Smith, our church's senior minister, was away on vacation. His associate, Rev. Evans, was assigned to preach in Smith's absence. Evans had earlier expressed informally social views probably too liberal for the time, but those views had apparently not been presented to the entire congregation. That was to change. The sermon was entitled "This Conflict of Race" and was based on Acts 17:26, in which Paul affirmed that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth." A summary of Evans's four main points follows:

Point One: [GOD] HATH MADE . . . Creation is where we all come from. Humanity has a common origin of equality under God. Therefore, humanity has a common destiny under God in a coming Kingdom of God.

Point Two: [God] hath made OF ONE BLOOD. Human blood types, which blacks and whites share in common, symbolize the unity that Creation demands of human beings.

The body shows us that God has kindred purposes for all human beings.

Point Three: [God] hath made of one blood ALL NATIONS OF MEN. Here Paul is saying that there is no such thing as a permanently superior race. God has made "all the nations," so God did not make any race to be permanently superior over other races.

Point Four: [God] hath made of one blood all the nations of men, FOR TO DWELL ON THE FACE OF THE EARTH. There it is. Paul believes that the goal of life is life together in a Kingdom not made with hands, high and lifted up in the future, but experienced by foretaste in the here and now. (from Rev. Claude Evans's sermon entitled "This Conflict of Race" and quoted from Ross, "This Conflict of Race: A Sermon which Created a Firestorm," monograph, pp. 8-10)

Given the social context of July 1942, we can no doubt highlight parts of the above exegesis that was not well received.

Following the service, one church member approached Evans with the observation that the young minister had made the greatest mistake of his life. Two days after the homiletic firestorm, Rev. John Owen



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Smith was called back from vacation to attend a called Board of Stewards meeting, the subject of which, of course, the “inappropriate” sermon. Smith defended Evans and generally defused the situation. Evans could stay but was not allowed to ever again preach from the Washington Street pulpit. A number of Washington Streeters other than Rev. Smith backed Evans, but the majority of the congregation did not. In less than a year Evans left Washington Street.

It is interesting to learn from Evans that his selection as SMU’s chaplain had been made with the selection group’s full knowledge of the sermon in Columbia. SMU was in the process in the mid-1950s of fully integrating its student body, and Rev. Claude Evans was deemed an experienced choice as chaplain to handle any fires of racial dissension. Evans claims at the time that he felt more like Br’er Rabbit being thrown in the brier patch (Paper of Claude Evans entitled “Exodus—Wilderness—Promised Land,” p. 11).

Rev. Evans’s experience at Washington Street Church dovetails nicely in 2020 with the work of the Racial Justice Team. I am certain that this sermon in question, in hindsight, might seem more like a tempest in a teapot and that the negative outcry appears insufferable. But in 1942 the words of Evans challenged Southern cultural norms and were far too socio-political in a time-honored House of the Lord. This young minister’s decision to explain scripture in such a contested way reminds me of a quotation from Theodore Roosevelt:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly...and who... if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.



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(Address at the Sorbonne, Paris, 23 April 1910—accessed from “Theodore Roosevelt Quotes,” [https://www.azquotes.com/author/12606—Theodore Roosevelt](https://www.azquotes.com/author/12606—Theodore+Roosevelt), Nov. 22, 2020)

The valiant Evans had been somewhat bloodied on that Sunday in 1942. All things considered, I suspect that he was also proud of the “dust and blood” on his face when he was thrown into the brier patch in Dallas.

A personal note: I’ve appreciated the chance to write about a few notable characters in the history of our wonderful old church. The Racial Justice Action Team was nice to ask me to complete this series for *The Connection*, and Jane has been quite a professional colleague in her publishing and photo selection skills. My best wishes to the RJAT as we all move forward (and away, I hope, from this horrific pandemic).

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