

DR. NELSON AND CIVIL RIGHTS IN 1963

Civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, dominated the news outlets in 1963. Newspapers carried photos of police with attack dogs harassing crowds as fire hoses blasted black demonstrators completely off their feet. The hatred peaked on Sunday, September 15, when a bomb exploded at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four young black girls.

Not all the action remained in downtown Birmingham. Many people in the suburbs attempted to influence a common sense approach to the firestorm. Dr. Dotson M. Nelson Jr., pastor of Mountain Brook Baptist Church, was one such man.

Instead of watching and saying nothing, Dr. Nelson took actions that endangered his family and angered some in our congregation.

He encouraged a member of our congregation to desegregate his business. He met with the YMCA board urging them to allow blacks as members. He expressed his human rights opinion at a large downtown city club meeting, which received a negative response and was reported the next day on the front page of the *Birmingham News*.

That's when threats started at his home. Buddy, his teenage son, remembered answering the phone during the family dinner one evening. The caller said, "Your daddy shot his mouth off and you're all gonna die."

Repeating the phone message back at the dinner table, Dr. Nelson said, "Sit down, son, and eat your supper. If a man doesn't have the nerve to tell you his name, he will never follow through on his threats."

Mrs. Nelson wasn't so sure. She said, "Dot was out of town for a week shortly after that call and I carefully checked for a bomb outside our house each night before bed."

Several years later a young adult asked, "Dr. Nelson, ministers all over town did not support the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. Why did you take such a strong stand that threatened your family and your career?"

Nelson replied, "Among other things, I was influenced by a song I learned as a child.

Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world."

Some of you will recognize that song as taught in Sunbeams, a WMU missions organization for young children. Amazing! Amazing that this simple song had such a huge life-changing result. Missions leaders...be encouraged!

Hoyt Wilson



SEPTEMBER 23, 2018

WE'VE A STORY TO TELL
75th Anniversary Memories of Mountain Brook Baptist Church

WHAT ABOUT 1963?

If you identify yourself as being from Birmingham, chances are you will be asked about the civil rights events of the early 1960s. In particular, you may be asked about the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Here's what happened at Mountain Brook Baptist Church.

The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed and four children murdered on September 15, 1963 at 10:22 in the morning. At that same time, Mountain Brook Baptist Church was holding worship services in the Fellowship Hall, with nearly 500 worshipers sitting on folding chairs. A telephone rang in the adjacent kitchen and somebody answered.

In a few minutes a church member walked to the temporary pulpit where Dr. Dotson M. Nelson Jr. was preaching. Dr. Nelson read the note, and preached on. After he concluded, he told his congregation the terrible news that shook Birmingham and the world.

On the next day, the *Birmingham News* interviewed Dr. Nelson and several other prominent pastors. Dr. Nelson said, "My heart is broken that such has happened in our city. I hope you will express compassion and concern and pray that we might recapture the spirit on which our community can continue to exist."

A month later he was the concluding speaker at the Birmingham Baptist Association annual meeting. That group adopted a resolution which affirmed belief in the brotherhood of Christians and promised to maintain harmonious relationships with black Baptists.

He soon got a standing ovation from the sales and marketing executives of Birmingham, when he urged them to "face facts and tell the truth." "We must convince ourselves and others of all races and creeds that we refuse to join sides against each other but will join together for what is right in our city." He warned against persons who were "determined to rule or ruin" the city. He said, "Only persons who don't have their gray cells working can say Birmingham is not pilloried before the world or that people are not afraid in the community. ... It's time for the silent multitude to be silent no longer.

"I do not come to engage in an orgy of blame-fixing. I can only confess my own sins, not those of others. I do not come to give solutions but to point a direction."

Yet race-based white violence in Alabama continued to erupt. On March 9, 1965, the Rev. James Reeb and two other white ministers from out of state visited Selma in support of nonviolent demonstrations seeking voting rights for blacks. They were beaten by white men. Mr. Reeb was refused treatment at the white hospital in Selma, and the black hospital did not have facilities to help him. He was transported to Birmingham where he had brain surgery, but he died on Thursday, March 11, age 38. (The Voting Rights Act would be passed on August 6.)

On Sunday, March 14, Dr. Nelson delivered a 400-word statement at the worship service of Mountain Brook Baptist Church. It was widely distributed. These are excerpts:

"My heart is heavy today—heavier than it has been since that September Sunday when four little children met their death as a result of a cowardly bomber. Another has died, beaten in our state. With Mr. Reeb's wisdom I may disagree; with his right to do what he did I cannot. Our state once again has become a battleground and the position from which we wage more is untenable. ... A city filled with good people is held up to ridicule.

"The root of the problem will not be solved by law but by grace. The Bible says 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' This is not violence but good will. I have long tried to operate by four principles in my own relationship with those of other races:

1. *Every person (of whatever race or color) must be considered and treated as a person.*
2. *Every person of whatever race or color who trusts my Lord Jesus Christ becomes my brother or sister in Christ.*
3. *Every person of whatever race or color is entitled to certain rights such as life, freedom, etc.*
4. *Every person of whatever race or color is entitled to additional privileges insofar as he is responsible or can or does become responsible.*

"I appeal to you, my people, to be calm, flee provocation, be slow to condemn, quick to forgive. Be much in prayer. Let us be ministers of reconciliation seeking to add to the law, good will ... that bruised feelings as well as bruised bodies may be bound up and we shall rise together to build a better state, nation, and world."

One of Dr. Nelson's ministerial friends was Dr. John Porter, pastor of Sixth Avenue Baptist Church (a church with predominantly black membership). Dr. Porter was a known confidante of Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. Porter once phoned Nelson to forewarn him that black demonstrators would be seeking admission to the worship service at Mountain Brook Baptist Church on the next Sunday. Dr. Nelson had already made it clear to Deacons and others at Mountain Brook Baptist Church that any visitor would be welcomed and seated, regardless of race or motive.

The visit occurred as expected. Ushers welcomed the black visitors, handed them a bulletin, and ushered them down front in view of everybody. When offering was collected, a Deacon made sure that the offering trays were passed in front of the visitors. Reporters who hoped for a show of resistance from Mountain Brook Baptist Church had nothing to report. The "protest" at Mountain Brook Baptist Church was a non-event.

The 1960s were tumultuous, not a time when Mountain Brook Baptist Church would want to anger its members. A huge fundraising project was needed to build a Sanctuary. Among Mountain Brook Baptist Church members, there was inherited racism—even some public agitators. Dr. Nelson was also outspoken, and Mountain Brook Baptist Church united to follow his leadership in all important issues.

In 1970, Dr. Nelson was president of the Birmingham Baptist Ministerial Association. The group had been racially integrated from its beginning at least 30 years before. As Dr. Nelson was presiding, the Rev. J.L. Ware, a black minister, arose to explain that he was withdrawing from the group.

The organization habitually met in the downtown building of First Baptist Church of Birmingham, which had recently refused to admit black members. Mr. Ware said he could no longer be part of a meeting in that building. He hoped that the group would permit him to rejoin, if it found an acceptable meeting place. Dr. Nelson constantly worked to speak up for better relationships among the races.

Sidney Burgess, a Birmingham broadcaster who later became a preacher, admired Dr. Nelson's leadership. He commended Dr. Nelson for encouraging formation of Arlington Baptist Church, the first attempt at a racially integrated Baptist church in Birmingham. Burgess had been a member of that group. Burgess compared Dr. Nelson to the "Good Samaritan," and said, "Now I know one, and lo and behold, he's got a whole church behind him."

