



## Radical Voices – Radical Lives

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I spent a good part of Wednesday in the car. Most of that time, I found myself drawn to the reports from Memphis covering the different commemorations being held on the 50th anniversary of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s tragic assassination.

### Author

The weekly eNews is provided by CGGC Executive Director Lance Finley



One of the things I appreciate about the opportunities I have to drive by myself is that it often gives me ample opportunity to reflect and process things. This special day certainly offered much to reflect upon. I learned a fair amount on Wednesday about Dr. King and the profound sense of struggle, weariness and even despair he experienced as he led the civil rights movement. I reflected upon his life and ministry, and the truly prophetic nature of his ministry and work in our culture. I reflected upon the various ways in which we've taken steps forward in our society, and yet sadly, at the same time seem to have so far to go in the seeking of racial justice in our culture.

These reflections stirred my curiosity. King was assassinated a couple of years before I was even born. All that I know of that era has been gleaned through historical accounts; I wasn't there to experience it personally. I wondered how the CGGC reacted to the racial tensions that reached a peak in the summer of 1968. How did my brothers and sisters respond to this important moment in our nation's history? Did they respond? Were they silent?

My curiosity got the best of me and I spent a little time in the CGGC Historical Museum and Archives yesterday afternoon thumbing through old editions of *The Church Advocate* from 1968. I was pleasantly surprised by what I found.

The summer of 1968 was actually a General Eldership year. Folks from across the CGGC gathered in Findlay for the triennial sessions, which carried the theme "The Church in a Revolutionary World." I came across a passage from that meeting that I want to share with you today. Dr. Richard Kern, then president of Winebrenner Theological Seminary, delivered a sermon at the General Eldership sessions on Tuesday evening entitled "The Church in a Revolutionary World – Relating to the Foundations of Faith." The following is taken from the September 1968 edition of *The Church Advocate*.

*As we further relate to the foundations of faith, let's go back about one hundred and twenty years ago. A somewhat obscure editor of a small religious newspaper in Eastern Pennsylvania was extremely annoyed by signs of increasing militarism all about him. It was during the Mexican-American War, to which our editor was opposed. During recent Fourth of July activities, the cadets at a local military academy fired their cannon every hour on the hour in honor of the occasion. This was bad enough. But even worse was the fact that local Christians were sending their sons to the military academy to receive training in military science. Disturbed enough to express himself, our editor dashed off a tart editorial for his newspaper. "This may do well enough for the people of this world," he wrote, "but we are surprised at some of the good people of Harrisburg who profess to be Christians, to send their sons to military schools, and have them trained for carnage and bloodshed. Between the spirit of war and the spirit of Christianity there is an utter incompatibility." He concluded on a note of defiance to his government (which he loved deeply, by the way). "That system of government which for the same deed will punish the citizen and reward the soldier, is not congenial with the righteous government of the Prince of Peace."*

*These were rather strong words in view of the war-time patriotism so much a part of this period. Certainly, they were not calculated to improve his image with a large portion of the local citizenry. But then, our local editor, who also happened to be a minister and evangelist, was not overly concerned about giving a favorable impression of himself in everything he said or wrote. Anyway, his image had been rather badly tarnished in the minds of responsible citizens because of his past dubious behavior. For example, in the area of race relations he had been at one time a real trouble maker... a radical if there ever was one. He was a determined opponent of slavery and friend of the black man. Slavery should be abolished at once. He said as much from the pulpits of the churches at which he preached from time to time, and wrote it in the columns of his newspaper. It was an unpopular thing to say. As a result, some of the local townspeople stoned the churches at which he spoke, breaking windows and the like. They threw rotten eggs at our editor. And in pro-slavery Virginia, they cheerfully burned his newspaper in the streets.*

*Our editor's name was John Winebrenner. Among his other activities was the promotion of a reform movement within the American church, one of the results of which is our being here together tonight. John Winebrenner had his faults, as all men. But an unwillingness to preach a revolutionary love to his revolutionary age was not one of them. We, his spiritual heirs, might profit from his example.*

Our world isn't terribly different from 1968 or 1848 for that matter. There are still wars, rumors of wars, violence, hatred, racism and every other kind of "ism" that falls far short of the God's intended flourishing of the world He created and loves.

Where are the voices like that of Martin Luther King Jr. and John Winebrenner today? They are noticeably and painfully absent in our world, our culture and our church. We don't like radicals.

I've long suspected that the key for the future of the CGGC in the years to come isn't going to be found through something new or innovating as much it will be discovered, uncovered or recovered from our past. As I've reflected these past couple of days, I'm so grateful for the radical voices and lives, men and women like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who were willing to risk it all for the calling God had placed on their lives.

Am I willing to be a radical voice and live a radical life? Are you willing to be a radical voice and live a radical life? We like conservative. We're comfortable with moderate. We know the traditional. John Winebrenner wasn't any of those in his day. He was a radical.

What will it take for us to rediscover our radical roots?

Christ's Peace,

**Lance**

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