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MEMPHIS, Tenn. AP - Criminal Court Judge W. Preston Battle told the Rev. James Bevel Friday he may not help defend James Earl Ray against a murder charge in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This, the judge said, is because Bevel is not a lawyer.

Bevel, formerly associated with King, says he has evidence which would acquit Ray. He and lawyer Percy Foreman, Ray's chief defense attorney, conferred with the judge earlier in the day.

After the meeting the judge said Bevel, an official of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which was founded by King, had asked court permission to associate himself with Ray's legal defense. Battle said he rejected the request because Bevel is not a lawyer. He said he explained that a law degree is required to practice law in Tennessee. Bevel told a meeting of church leaders Thursday night that he could prove "within 30 minutes" it would have been impossible for Ray to have assassinated Dr. King as he stood on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel last April 4. The sniper's bullet cut down the civil rights leader shortly after he arrived here to head a march in support of the city's striking sanitation workers.

Bevel declined to disclose the nature of the evidence which he said would free Ray. Ray's trial is scheduled to start March 3.

Bevel made the statement after he and Foreman conferred with Ray in the prisoner's top-security cell in the Shelby County Jail. He was the first person, other than Ray's attorneys and his two brothers, to be permitted to visit Ray.

Sheriff William N. Morris, in charge of the prisoner's security, said he gave permission for the visit at Foreman's request and after receiving Judge Battle's approval.

Bevel offered his aid to Ray last Saturday in a telegram sent from his Philadelphia home. He came here Thursday.

He told the church group, which included officials of the National Council of Churches, that he could prove "beyond a doubt" Ray is innocent.

"People should do justice," he said. "Murdering Ray has no relation to justice. Folks are so interested in justice that they are going to let the state lynch a man?"

In Atlanta, the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, King's successor as head of the SCLC, said he viewed Bevel's action as a way of moving "nonviolence into a new dimension in American life."

"Rev. Bevel," Abernathy said, "is speaking to the real issue - namely that it is not who killed Dr. King, but what killed him."

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