

A Call for Unity

April 12, 1963 [Good Friday]

We the undersigned clergymen are among those who, in January, issued "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense," in dealing with racial problems in Alabama. We expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts, but urged that decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed.

Since that time there had been some evidence of increased forbearance and a willingness to face facts. Responsible citizens have undertaken to work on various problems which cause racial friction and unrest. In Birmingham, recent public events have given indication that we all have opportunity for a new constructive and realistic approach to racial problems.

However, we are not confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.

We agree rather with certain local Negro leadership which has called for honest and open negotiation of racial issues in our area. And we believe this kind of facing of issues can best be accomplished by citizens of our own metropolitan area, white and Negro, meeting with their knowledge and experience of the local situation. All of us need to face that responsibility and find proper channels for its accomplishment.

Just as we formerly pointed out that "hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions," we also point out that such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham.

We commend the community as a whole, and the local news media and law enforcement in particular, on the calm manner in which these demonstrations have been handled. We urge the public to continue to show restraint should the demonstrations continue, and the law enforcement officials to remain calm and continue to protect our city from violence.

We further strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.

Bishop Carpenter of the Episcopal Church, Alabama

Bishop Durick of the Catholic Diocese of Mobile and Birmingham

Rabbi Grafman of Temple Emanu-EL, Birmingham

Bishop Hardin of the Methodist Church, Alabama and West Florida

Bishop Harmon of the Methodist Church, Northern Alabama

Bishop Murray of the Episcopal Church, Alabama

Reverend Earl Stallings, Pastor First Baptist Church, Birmingham

Reverend Ramage, Moderator of the Alabama Synod of the Presbyterian Church

Excerpts from Letter from Birmingham Jail

April 16, 1963 [The Tuesday after Easter]

My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities “unwise and untimely.” ... But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham since you have been influenced by the view which argues against “outsiders coming in.” I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. ... Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. ...

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages ... as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. ...

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. ... It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham,

but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community no alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct actions. We have gone through all these steps in Birmingham. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. ... There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good-faith negotiations. ...

Then, last September, came the opportunity to talk with leaders of Birmingham's economic community. ... Certain promises were made by the merchants ... [but] as the weeks and months went by, we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise.

We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification. We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: "Are you willing to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?" ...

You may well ask, "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.

One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely. ... My friends, ... We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was "well timed"

in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait!” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see ... that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. ... Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But ... when you have seen vicious mobs lynch [people] at will ... when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you are humiliated day in and day out by the nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; ... then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. ...

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. ... One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that “an unjust law is no law at all.” ...

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? ... To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. ... Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and awful. [Theologian] Paul Tillich said that sin is separation. ... Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong. ...

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny the citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.

I hope you are able to ace the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law ... One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar ... It was practice superbly by the early Christians ... Academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience ... In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience. ...

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was “legal” ... It was “illegal” to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish [neighbors].

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. ...

We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. ...

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time in relation to the struggle for freedom. ... Time itself is neutral ... Human progress never rolls on in wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.

You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. ...

But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love ... Amos an extremist for justice ... Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel ... Was not Martin Luther an extremist ... Abraham Lincoln ... And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ..." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremist for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? ... Jesus was an extremist for love, truth and goodness ... Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

Let me take note of my other major disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. ... I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church. ... I felt ... that the white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, ... [they] have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent ...

In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances would reach the power structure. ... But again I have been disappointed.

There was a time when the church was very powerful ...

Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is a defender of the status quo. ...

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour, but even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. ...

Never before have I written so long a letter. ... I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts, and pray long prayers?

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as ... a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away ... and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love ... will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.

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