

# Letter from Birmingham City Jail

by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.  
(1929–1968)

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1 *The following is the public statement directed to Martin Luther King, Jr., by eight Alabama clergymen.*

We the undersigned clergymen are among those who, in January, issued “an  
5 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.

10 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.

15 However, we are now 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.

20 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.

25 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.

30 We commend the community as a whole, and the local news media and law enforcement officials 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.

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1 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  
5 to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order  
and common sense.

*Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter, Bishop Joseph A. Durick, Rabbi  
Milton L. Grafman, Bishop Paul Hardin, Bishop Nolan B. Harmon,  
10 Rev. George M. Murray, Rev. Edward V. Ramage, Rev. Earl Stallings.*

April 12, 1963

My dear Fellow Clergymen,

15 While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent  
statement calling our present activities “unwise and untimely.” Seldom, if ever, do  
I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all of the  
criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the  
course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work, but since I feel  
20 that you are men of genuine goodwill and your criticisms are sincerely set forth,  
I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable  
terms.

I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have  
25 been influenced by the argument of “outsiders coming in.” I have the honor of  
serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organi-  
zation operating in every Southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia.  
We have some eighty-five affiliate organizations all across the South—one being  
Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Whenever necessary and possi-  
30 ble we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several  
months ago our local affiliate here in Birmingham invited us to be on call to engage  
in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily  
consented and when the hour came we lived up to our promises. So I am here,  
along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here. I am here  
35 because I have basic organizational ties here.

Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth  
century prophets left their little villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far  
beyond the boundaries of their home towns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his  
little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every  
40 hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel  
of freedom beyond my particular home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond  
to the Macedonian call for aid.

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

1 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  
5 United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country.

You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham.  
But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the  
conditions that brought the demonstrations into being. I am sure that each of you  
would want to go beyond the superficial social analyst who looks merely at effects,  
10 and does not grapple with underlying causes. I would not hesitate to say that it is  
unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this  
time, but I would say in even more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate  
that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other  
alternative.

15 In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: 1) Collection of the facts  
to determine whether injustices are alive. 2) Negotiation. 3) Self-purification and  
4) Direct Action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham. There  
can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community.

Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United  
20 States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country.  
Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been  
more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than any  
city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal and unbelievable facts. On the basis  
of these conditions Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the  
25 political leaders consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

Then came the opportunity last September to talk with some of the leaders of  
the economic community. In these negotiating sessions certain promises were  
made by the merchants—such as the promise to remove the humiliating racial  
signs from the stores. On the basis of these promises Rev. Shuttlesworth and the  
30 leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to call a  
moratorium on any type of demonstration. As the weeks and months unfolded we  
realized we were the victims of a broken promise. The signs remained. Like so  
many experiences of the past we were confronted with blasted hopes, and the dark  
shadow of a deep disappointment settled upon us. So we had no alternative except  
35 that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as  
a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national  
community. We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. So we decided to  
go through a process of self-purification. We started having workshops on  
nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, “Are you able to accept  
40 blows without retaliating?” “Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?” We  
decided to set our direct action program around the Easter season, realizing that  
with the exception of Christmas, this was the largest shopping period of the year.  
Knowing that a strong economic withdrawal program would be the by-product of

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1 direct action, we felt that this was the best time to bring pressure on the merchants  
for the needed changes. Then it occurred to us that the March election was ahead  
and so we speedily decided to postpone action until after election day. When we  
discovered that Mr. Connor was in the run-off, we decided again to postpone  
5 action so that the demonstrations could not be used to cloud the issues. At this time  
we agreed to begin our nonviolent witness the day after the run-off.

This reveals that we did not move irresponsibly into direct action. We too  
wanted to see Mr. Connor defeated; so we went through postponement after  
postponement to aid in this community need. After this we felt that direct action  
10 could be delayed no longer.

#### CREATIVE TENSION

You may well ask, "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotia-  
15 tion a better path?" You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this  
is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis  
and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused  
to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that  
it can no longer be ignored. I just referred to the creation of tension as a part of the  
20 work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound rather shocking. But I must  
confess that I am not afraid of the word tension. I have earnestly worked and  
preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive non-violent  
tension that is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt it was necessary to create  
a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and  
25 half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we  
must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in  
society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to  
the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. So the purpose of the  
direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the  
30 door to negotiation. We, therefore, concur with you in your call for negotiation.  
Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in the tragic attempt to live  
in monologue rather than dialogue.

One of the basic points in your statement is that our acts are untimely. Some  
have asked, "Why didn't you give the new administration time to act?" The only  
35 answer that I can give to this inquiry is that the new administration must be  
prodded about as much as the outgoing one before it acts. We will be sadly  
mistaken if we feel that the election of Mr. Boutwell will bring the millennium to  
Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is much more articulate and gentle than Mr.  
Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to the task of maintaining the  
40 status quo. The hope I see in Mr. Boutwell is that he will be reasonable enough to  
see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this  
without pressure from the devotees of civil rights. My friends, I must say to you  
that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and  
nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged

1 groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

5 We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was “well timed” according to the timetable 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 a piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” It has been  
10 a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed  
15 toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess 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 your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse,  
20 kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; 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 suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just  
25 been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Fun-town is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing  
30 pathos: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; when your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes  
35 “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted at night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense  
40 of “nobodiness”; 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 an abyss of injustice where they experience the blackness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

1 **BREAKING THE LAW**

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the  
 5 Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just and there are unjust laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that "An unjust law is no law  
 10 at all."

Now what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law  
 15 that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. 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. To use the words of Martin Buber, the great  
 20 Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an "I-it" relationship for the "I-thou" relationship, and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. So segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Isn't segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful  
 25 estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I can urge men to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong.

Let us turn to a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand a just law is a code that a majority compels  
 30 a minority to follow that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

Let me give another explanation. An unjust law is a code inflicted upon a minority which that minority had no part in enacting or creating because they did not have the unhampered right to vote. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up the segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout the  
 35 state of Alabama all types of conniving methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters and there are some counties without a single Negro registered to vote despite the fact that the Negro constitutes a majority of the population. Can any law set up in such a state be considered democratically structured?

40 These are just a few examples of unjust and just laws. There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit. Now there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the

1 ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amend-  
ment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust.

I hope you can see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I  
advocate evading or defying the law as the rabid segregationist would do. This  
5 would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do it openly, lovingly  
(not hatefully as the white mothers did in New Orleans when they were seen on  
television screaming “nigger, nigger, nigger”), and with a willingness to accept the  
penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is  
unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience  
10 of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect  
for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was  
seen sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws  
of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher moral law was involved. It was practiced  
15 superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and the  
excruciating pain of chopping blocks before submitting to certain unjust laws of  
the Roman empire. To a degree academic freedom is a reality today because  
Socrates practiced civil disobedience.

## 20 THE WHITE MODERATE

We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was “legal” and  
everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was “illegal.” It was  
“illegal” to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Germany. But I am sure that if I had  
25 lived in Germany during that time I would have aided and comforted my Jewish  
brothers even though it was illegal. If I lived in a Communist country today where  
certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I believe I would  
openly advocate disobeying these anti-religious laws. I must make two honest  
confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that  
30 over the last 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 the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku  
Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to  
justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive  
35 peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says “I agree with you in the  
goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action”; who  
paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who  
lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a  
“more convenient season.” Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is  
40 more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Luke-  
warm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

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 to do this they

1 become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had  
hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the  
South is merely a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative  
peace, where the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substance-filled  
5 positive peace, where all men will respect the dignity and worth of human  
personality. Actually, we who engage in non-violent 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. Like  
a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with  
10 all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must  
likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of  
human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you asserted that our actions, even though peaceful, must  
be condemned because they precipitate violence. But can this assertion be logically  
15 made? Isn't this like condemning the robbed man because his possession of money  
precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his  
unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical delvings precipitated the  
misguided popular mind to make him drink the hemlock? Isn't this like condemn-  
ing Jesus because His unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to  
20 His will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see, as federal  
courts have consistently affirmed, that it is immoral to urge an individual to  
withdraw his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest  
precipitates violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time. I  
25 received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas which said: "All  
Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but  
it is possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity  
almost 2000 years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to  
come to earth." All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time that  
30 will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either  
destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have  
used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to  
repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad  
people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that  
35 human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the  
tireless efforts and persistent work 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.  
We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do  
right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our  
40 pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to  
lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of  
human dignity.

You spoke of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather  
disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of the

1 extremist. I started thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two  
opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency made up  
of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, have been so completely  
drained of self-respect and a sense of “somebodiness” that they have adjusted to  
5 segregation, and of a few Negroes in the middle class who, because of a degree of  
academic and economic security, and because at points they profit by segregation,  
have unconsciously become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other  
force is one of bitterness and hatred and comes perilously close to advocating  
violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing  
10 up over the nation, the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad’s Muslim  
movement. This movement is nourished by the contemporary frustration over the  
continued existence of racial discrimination. It is made up of people who have lost  
faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have  
concluded that the white man is an incurable “devil.” I have tried to stand between  
15 these two forces saying that we need not follow the “do-nothingism” of the  
complacent or the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. There is the more  
excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I’m grateful to God that, through the  
Negro church, the dimension of nonviolence entered our struggle. If this philoso-  
phy had not emerged, I am convinced that by now many streets of the South would  
20 be flowing with floods of blood. And I am further convinced that if our white  
brothers dismiss as “rabble rousers” and “outside agitators” those of us who are  
working through the channels of nonviolent direct action and refuse to support  
our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes, out of frustration and despair, will  
seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies, a development that will  
25 lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare.

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will  
eventually come. This is what happened to the American Negro. Something within  
has reminded him of his birthright of freedom; something without has reminded  
him that he can gain it. Consciously and unconsciously, he has been swept in by  
30 what the Germans call the *zeitgeist*, and with his black brothers of Africa, and his  
brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, he is moving  
with a sense of cosmic urgency toward the promised land of racial justice.  
Recognizing this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should  
readily understand public demonstrations. The Negro has many pent up resent-  
35 ments and latent frustrations. He has to get them out. So let him march sometime;  
let him have his prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; understand why he must have  
sit-ins and freedom rides. If his repressed emotions do not come out in these  
nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. This is  
not a threat; it is a fact of history. So I have not said to my people “get rid of your  
40 discontent.” But I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be  
channelized through the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. Now this  
approach is being dismissed as extremist. I must admit that I was initially  
disappointed in being so categorized.

1 **EXTREMISTS FOR LOVE**

But as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love—“Love  
 5 your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.” Was not Amos an extremist for justice—“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ—“I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” Was not Martin Luther an extremist—“Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God.” Was not  
 10 John Bunyan an extremist—“I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.” Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist—“This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.” Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist—“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of  
 15 extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for the cause of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary’s hill, three men were crucified. We must not forget that all three men were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and  
 20 thusly fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. So, after all, maybe the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this. Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few  
 25 members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed  
 30 themselves to it. They are still too small in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some like Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden and James Dabbs have written about our struggle in eloquent, prophetic and understanding terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They have languished in filthy roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of angry  
 35 policemen who see them as “dirty nigger lovers.” They, unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful “action” antidotes to combat the disease of segregation.

**THE WHITE CHURCH**

40

Let me rush on to mention my other disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some

1 significant stands on this issue. I commend you, Rev. Stallings, for your Christian stand on this past Sunday, in welcoming Negroes to your worship service on a non-segregated basis. I commend the Catholic leaders of this state for integrating Springhill College several years ago.

5 But despite these notable exceptions I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say that as one of the negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say it as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord  
10 of life shall lengthen.

I had the strange feeling when I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery several years ago that we would have the support of the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be some of our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright oppo-  
15 nents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained-glass windows.

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our  
20 cause, and with deep moral concern, serve as the channel through which our just grievances would get to the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed. I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say, "follow  
25 this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "those are social issues  
30 with which the gospel has no real concern," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other  
35 community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.

I have travelled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings.  
40 Over and over again I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of inter-position and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave the clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were

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1 their voices of support when tired, bruised and weary Negro men and women  
decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of  
creative protest?"

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment, I have wept  
5 over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love.  
There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the  
church; I love her sacred walls. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique  
position of being the son, the grandson and the great-grandson of preachers. Yes,  
I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred  
10 that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists.

### **DISTURBERS OF THE PEACE**

There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period  
15 when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for  
what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that  
recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that  
transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town  
the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for  
20 being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the  
conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," and had to obey God rather than  
man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-  
intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such  
ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

25 Things are different now. The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual  
voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo.  
Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the  
average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of  
things as they are.

30 But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of  
today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its  
authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant  
social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. I am meeting young people  
every day whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust.

35 Maybe again, I have been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably  
bound to status quo to save our nation and the world? Maybe I must turn my faith  
to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ecclesia and  
the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from  
the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of  
40 conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have  
left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us.  
They have gone through the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom.  
Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have even been kicked out of their

1 churches, and lost support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have  
gone with the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. These men  
have been the leaven in the lump of the race. Their witness has been the spiritual  
salt that has preserved the true meaning of the Gospel in these troubled times. They  
5 have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.

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. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our  
motives are presently misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in  
10 Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom.  
Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of  
America. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth we were here. Before the pen of  
Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration  
of Independence, we were here. For more than two centuries our fore-parents  
15 labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; and they built the  
homes of their masters in the midst of brutal injustice and shameful humiliation—  
and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the  
inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will  
surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and  
20 the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

#### **BULL CONNOR'S POLICE**

I must close now. But before closing I am impelled to mention one other point in  
25 your statement that troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the  
Birmingham police force for keeping “order” and “preventing violence.” I don’t  
believe you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its  
angry violent dogs literally biting six unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I don’t believe  
you would so quickly commend the policemen if you would observe their ugly and  
30 inhuman treatment of Negroes here in the City Jail; if you would watch them push  
and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you would see them slap and  
kick old Negro men and young boys; if you will observe them, as they did on two  
occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I’m  
sorry that I can’t join you in your praise for the police department.

35 It is true that they have been rather disciplined in their public handling of the  
demonstrators. In this sense they have been rather publicly “non-violent.” But for  
what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the last few years  
I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use  
must be as pure as the ends we seek. So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong  
40 to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as  
wrong, or even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Maybe Mr.  
Connor and his policemen have been rather publicly nonviolent, as Chief Pritchett  
was in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to

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1 maintain the immoral end of flagrant racial injustice. T.S. Eliot has said that there is no greater treason than to do the right deed for the wrong reason.

I wish to commend the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in  
5 the midst of the most inhuman provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, courageously and with a majestic sense of purpose facing jeering and hostile mobs and the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman of Montgomery, Alabama,  
10 who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride the segregated buses, and responded to one who inquired about her tiredness with ungrammatical profundity: "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested." They will be the young high school and college students, young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders courageously and nonviolently sitting-in at lunch counters and  
15 willingly going to jail for conscience's sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thusly, carrying our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the  
20 formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written a letter this long (or should I say a book?). I'm afraid that it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what  
25 else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said  
30 anything in this letter that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

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 an integrationist or a civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all  
35 hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

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