

Letter from Birmingham City Jail

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

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 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

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1 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.

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

April 12, 1963

15 My dear Fellow Clergymen,

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 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 been influenced by the argument of “outsiders coming in.” I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization 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 possible 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 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 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.

1 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
5 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 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 con-
10 ditions 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,
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
15 unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community
with no other alternative.

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
20 can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community

Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United
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
25 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 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
30 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
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
35 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 alterna-
tive except 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
40 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 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

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1 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 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
5 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 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
10 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 could be delayed no longer.

CREATIVE TENSION

15 You may well ask, "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation 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
20 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 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
25 necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and 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
30 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 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.

35 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 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
40 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 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

1 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
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
5 reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

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.
10 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 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.”
15 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 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.”
20 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, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity;
when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smother-
ing in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you
25 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 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
30 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 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
35 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 “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
40 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 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

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1 where they experience the blackness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

BREAKING THE LAW

5 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 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
10 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 at all."

Now what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when
15 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 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.
20 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 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
25 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 estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I can urge men to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong.

30 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 a minority to follow that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

35 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 state of Alabama all types of conniving methods are used to prevent Negroes
40 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?

1 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 or-
5 dinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment
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
would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do it openly, lovingly
10 (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 of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very
15 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 prac-
ticed superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and
20 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.

THE WHITE MODERATE

25 We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was “legal” and every-
thing 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 lived in
Germany during that time I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers
30 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 confes-
sions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the
last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have
35 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 peace
which is the presence of justice; who constantly says “I agree with you in the goal
40 you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalisti-
cally 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 more

1 frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm 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
5 they 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 positive peace, where all men will respect the dignity and worth of
10 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 all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice
15 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 made? Isn't this like condemning the robbed man because his possession of
20 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 condemning Jesus because His unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to His will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see,
25 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 received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas which said: "All
30 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 will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used
35 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 human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes
40 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 pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood.

1 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
5 the 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 segregation, and of a few Negroes in the middle class who, because of a degree of
10 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 up over the nation, the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim
15 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 these two forces saying that we need not follow the "do-nothingism"
20 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 philosophy had not emerged, I am convinced that by now many streets of the South would be flowing with floods of blood. And I am further convinced that if
25 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 lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare.

30 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 what the Germans call the zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa,
35 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 resentments and latent frustrations. He has to get them out. So let him march
40 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

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1 “get rid of your 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.

5

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
10 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
15 not 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 ex-
tremist—“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 extremist
20 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 cruci-
fied. We must not forget that all three men were crucified for the same crime—the
crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thusly fell below
25 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 optimis-
tic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members
30 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 themselves to it. They
35 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 policemen who see them as “dirty
40 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.

1 THE WHITE CHURCH

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 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.

10 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 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 opponents, 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.

20 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 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 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 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.

35 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 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

1 beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. 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
 5 Wallace gave the clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were 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
 over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love.
 10 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
 that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists.

15

DISTURBERS OF THE PEACE

There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period
 when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for
 20 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
 being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the
 25 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-in-
 toxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient
 evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

Things are different now. The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual
 30 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.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of
 35 today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its au-
 thentic 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.

Maybe again, I have been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably
 40 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 conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They

1 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 churches, and lost support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have
5 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
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
10 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 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
15 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 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
20 out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpress-
ible 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 the
eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

25 **BULL CONNOR'S POLICE**

I must close now. But before closing I am impelled to mention one other point
in your statement that troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the
Birmingham police force for keeping “order” and “preventing violence.” I don’t
30 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 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
35 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.

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
40 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 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.

14 Letter from Birmingham City Jail

1 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 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.

5 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 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
10 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, 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
15 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 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
20 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 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
25 it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what 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
30 is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said 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
35 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 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.