

# Letter From Birmingham City Jail

by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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

5 We the undersigned clergymen are among those who, in January, issued "an  
appeal for law and order and common sense," in dealing with racial prob-  
lems in Alabama. We expressed understanding that honest convictions in  
racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts, but urged that deci-  
sions 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  
30 extreme measures are justified in Birmingham.

1 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  
5 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 peace-  
fully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause  
should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and  
10 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 C. C. J. Carpenter, Bishop Joseph A. Durick, Rabbi  
Milton L. Grafman, Bishop Paul Hardin, Bishop Nolan B. Harmon,  
15 Rev. George M. Murray, Rev. Edward V. Ramage, Rev. Earl Stallings.*  
April 12, 1963

My dear Fellow Clergymen,

20 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  
25 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  
30 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 head-  
quarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliate organiza-  
tions all across the South—one being Alabama Christian Movement for  
35 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 nonvio-  
lent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily con-  
sented 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  
40 here because I have basic organizational ties here.

Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the

1 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  
5 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 hap-  
pens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.  
10 We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single gar-  
ment 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 in this country.

15 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, and does not grapple with underlying causes. I  
20 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 struc-  
ture of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: 1) Collection of  
25 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  
30 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 city in this nation. These are the hard,  
brutal and unbelievable facts. On the basis of these conditions Negro lead-  
ers sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the political leaders consis-  
35 tently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

Then came the opportunity last September to talk with some of the lead-  
ers 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.  
40 Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for  
Human Rights agreed to call a moratorium on any type of demonstration.

1 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 that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means  
5 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  
10 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 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  
15 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 action so that the demonstrations could not be used to cloud the issues. At this time  
20 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 could be delayed no longer.

### CREATIVE TENSION

30 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 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  
35 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  
40 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

1 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 brother-  
 hood. 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,  
 5 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?"  
 10 The only answer that I can give to this inquiry is that the new administra-  
 tion 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 articu-  
 late and gentle than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to  
 15 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 that we have not made a single  
 gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure.  
 20 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  
 reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily  
 25 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  
 30 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." We have waited for more  
 than three hundred and forty years for our constitutional and God-given  
 35 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." 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  
 40 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

1 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  
5 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 depress-  
ing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her  
begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitter-  
ness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-  
10 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 motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day  
in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your  
15 first name becomes "nigger" and your middle name becomes "boy" (how-  
ever 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 con-  
stantly at tip-toe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and  
20 plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fight-  
ing 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  
where they experience the blackness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you  
can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

#### BREAKING THE LAW

30 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 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  
35 Augustine that "An unjust law is no law 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 har-  
mony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an  
40 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 per-

1 sonality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation dis-  
 torts 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-  
 5 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 estrangement, his terrible  
 10 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  
 15 a majority compels 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 legis-  
 20 lature 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 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  
 25 state be considered democratically structured?

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  
 30 a parade, but when the ordinance 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,  
 35 lovingly (not hatefully as the white mothers did in New Orleans when they  
 were seen on television screaming "nigger, nigger, nigger"), and with a will-  
 ingness 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 stay-  
 ing in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in  
 40 reality expressing the very highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It

1 was seen sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to  
2 obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher moral law was involved.  
3 It was practiced superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face  
4 hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks before submit-  
5 ting to certain unjust laws of the Roman empire. To a degree academic free-  
6 dom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience.

#### 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 lived in Germany during that time I would have aided and com-  
forted my Jewish brothers even though it was illegal. If I lived in a  
15 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 over the last few  
years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have  
20 almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling  
block in the 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; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of  
tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly  
25 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 more frustrating than  
30 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 they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of  
social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that  
35 the present tension in the South is merely a necessary phase of the transi-  
tion 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 human personality. Actually, we who  
engage in non-violent direct action are not the creators of tension. We  
40 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



1 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 must like-  
 wise 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.

5 In your statement you asserted that our actions, even though peaceful,  
 must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But can this asser-  
 tion be logically 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  
 10 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, as federal courts have consis-  
 tently affirmed, that it is immoral to urge an individual to withdraw his  
 15 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 Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights even-  
 20 tually, 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 teach-  
 ings 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 either destructively or constructively. I am coming  
 25 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 through the tireless efforts and  
 30 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 trans-  
 form our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now  
 is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice  
 35 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 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  
 40 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

1 have adjusted to 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  
5 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 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,  
10 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" 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  
15 Negro church, the dimension of nonviolence entered our struggle. If this phi-  
losophy 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 our white brothers dismiss as "rabble rousers" and "outside agitators"  
those of us who are working through the channels of nonviolent direct action  
20 and refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes, out of frus-  
tration and despair, will seek solace and security in black nationalist ideolo-  
gies, a development that will 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.  
25 Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom; something  
without has reminded him that he can gain it. Consciously and uncon-  
sciously, he has been swept in by 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  
30 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 frus-  
trations. 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 non-  
35 violent 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 discontent." But I have tried to say that this normal and healthy dis-  
content can be channelized through the creative outlet of nonviolent direct  
action. Now this approach is being dismissed as extremist. I must admit that  
40 I was initially disappointed in being so categorized.

## 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 your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that  
 5 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 John Bunyan an extremist—  
 10 "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 extremist will  
 15 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,  
 20 and 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  
 25 optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few 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,  
 30 that some of our white brothers have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed 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  
 35 jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of angry 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

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.

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.

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.

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.

1 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  
 5 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 Wallace gave  
 the clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support  
 10 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. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep  
 15 love. Yes, I love the church; I love her sacred walls. How could I do other-  
 wise? 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.

#### 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  
 25 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 immedi-  
 ately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside  
 30 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 "astronomi-  
 cally 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, inef-  
 35 fectual 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  
 40 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

1 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  
5 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  
10 from the paralyzing chains of 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 churches, and lost support  
15 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  
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.  
20 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 Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal  
of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny  
25 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 labored in this country  
without wages; they made cotton king; and they built the homes of their  
30 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 inex-  
pressible 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.

#### 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 com-  
mended the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing  
40 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, non-

violent 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 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 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. 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.

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 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 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 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 it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a com-

1   fortable 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?

5   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 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.

10   I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circum-  
stances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an inte-  
grationist 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  
15   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.