

“The Birth of A New Age,”  
Address Delivered on  
11 August 1956 at the Fiftieth  
Anniversary of Alpha Phi Alpha in Buffalo

1956

1956  
Chicago, Ill.

*The evening after testifying at the Democratic National Convention King delivered the featured speech at the fiftieth-anniversary convention banquet of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity in Buffalo. He received the Alpha Award of Honor for “Christian leadership in the cause of first class citizenship for all mankind.” Other award winners that evening included Autherine Lucy, Thurgood Marshall, and Arthur Shores. In his address King suggests how Alpha men and other African Americans can best prepare for the challenges and responsibilities of the “new order” that is replacing the “old order” of colonialism abroad and segregation at home. Declaring that “we will have to rise up in protest” to usher in this “new age,” King envisions “a beloved community . . . where men will live together as brothers.” The speech was transcribed for publication in an anniversary booklet published by the fraternity later in 1956.*

Thank you so much for your kindness Brother Alexander. Brother Stanley, Brothers of Alpha, Ladies and Gentlemen, I need not pause to say how happy I am to be here this evening and to be a part of this auspicious occasion.<sup>1</sup> I can assure you that this is one of the happiest moments of my life. As I look over the audience I see so many familiar faces and so many dear friends that it is a real pleasure to be here. I only regret that certain responsibilities elsewhere made it impossible for me to be in on the other part of the sessions. My heart was here and I was here in spirit. I am very happy to share the platform with so many distinguished Alpha men and so many distinguished American citizens and I say once more that this is a high moment in my life.

I would like to take just a moment to express my personal appreciation to our General President, Brother Stanley in particular, and to all of the Alpha brothers over the country in general for the moral support and the financial contributions that you have given to those of us who walk the streets of Montgomery. I can assure that these things have given us renewed courage and vigor to carry on. The thing that we are doing in Montgomery we feel is bigger than Montgomery and bigger than 50,000 Negroes, and I assure you that we always appreciate your kind words and your contributions. I can remember those days, very dark days, when many of us confronted a trial in court and I could look out in the courtroom and see our very eminent General President. That made me feel very good as an Alpha man and I want to thank you for what you have done all along. But I

---

1. King refers to Raymond Pace Alexander, toastmaster for the evening, and Frank L. Stanley, Alpha Phi Alpha general president.

1956 did not come here tonight to talk about Montgomery and I know it is getting late. I am sure you don't want to be bored with me too long and I am going to try to comply with your silent request.

I want to use as a subject, "The Birth of A New Age." Those of us who lived in the 20th Century are privileged to live in one of the most momentous periods of human history. It is an exciting age, filled with hope. It is an age in which a new world order is being born. We stand today between two worlds—the dying old and the emerging new. I am aware of the fact that there are those who would argue that we live in the most ghastly period of human history. They would contend that the deepest of deep rumblings of the discontent in Asia, and we have risings in Africa, the naturalistic longings of Egypt and the racial tensions of America, are all indicative of the deep and tragic midnight which encounters our civilization. They would argue that we are going backwards instead of forward, that we are retrogressing instead of progressing. But far from representing retrogression or tragic hopelessness, the present tension represents the necessary pains that accompany the birth of anything new. It is both historically and biologically true that there can be no birth or growth without birth and growing pains. Wherever there is the emergence of the new and the fading of the old, that is historically true and so the tensions which we witness in the world today are indicative of the fact that a new world is being born and an old world is passing away.

We are all familiar with this old world that is dying, the old world that is passing away, we have lived with it, we have seen it, we look out and see it in its international proportion and we see it in the form of Colonialism and Imperialism. We realize that there are approximately 2,400,000,000 people on the face of the globe and the vast majority of these peoples in the world are colored. About 1,600,000,000 of these people of the world are colored and most of these people, if not all of the colored people of the world, have lived under the yoke of Colonialism and Imperialism, fifty years ago to twenty-five years ago. All of these people were dominated and controlled by some foreign power. We could look over to China and see the 600,000,000 men and women there under the yoke of the British and the Dutch and the French. We could look to Indonesia we could notice the 100,000,000 there under the pressing yoke of the Dutch. We could turn our eyes to India and Pakistan and notice there are 400,000,000 brown men and women under the pressing yoke of the British. We could turn our eyes to Africa and notice the 200,000,000 black men and women there dominated by the British, the Dutch, the French and the Belgian. All of these people lived for years and centuries under the yoke of foreign power and they were dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated and humiliated. But there comes a time when people grow tired, when the throbbing desires of freedom begin to break forth. There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of the tramper. There comes a time when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of exploitation, where they have experienced the bleakness and madness of despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing in the pitying state of an Alpine November.

340 So with the coming of this time an uprising started and protest started and these peoples rose up against Colonialism and Imperialism and as a result, out of

1,600,000,000 colored people in the world today, 1,300,000,000 are free. They have their own government, their own economic system and their own educational system. They have broken aloose from the evils of the Colonialism and they are passing through the wilderness of adjustment, through the promised land of cultural integration, and if we look back we see the old order of Colonialism and Imperialism thrown upon the seashores of the world and we see the new world of freedom and justice emerging on the horizon of the universe. But not only have we seen the emergence of this new order on the international scale, not only have we seen the old order on the international scale, we have seen the old order on the national scale. We see it on the national scale in the form of segregation and discrimination—that is the old order that we witness today passing away. We know the history of this old order in America.

You will remember that it was in the year 1619 that the first Negro slave was brought to the shores of this nation. They were brought here from the soils of Africa and unlike the Pilgrim fathers who landed here at Plymouth a year later, they were brought here against their will. For more than 200 years Africa was raped and plundered, a native kingdom disorganized, the people and rulers demoralized and throughout slavery the Negro slaves were treated in a very [*in?*]human form. This is expressed very clearly in the Dred Scott Decision in 1857 when the Supreme Court of this nation said in substance that the Negro is not a citizen of the United States, he is merely property subject to the dictates of his owner.

Then came 1896 when the same court, the Supreme Court of the nation, in the famous Plessy vs. Ferguson Case, established the doctrine of “separate but equal” as the law of the land. Now segregation had moral and legal sanction by the highest court in the land and of course, they were always interested in the separate aspect but never the equal and this doctrine “separate but equal” made for tragic inequality. It made for injustice, it made for exploitation, it made for suppression, and it went a long time but then something happened to the Negro himself. He had traveled and he was getting more education and getting greater economic power and he came to feel that he was somebody. He came to the point that he was now re-evaluating his natural investments and he came to the point of seeing that the basic thing about an individual is this fundamental, not in the texture or the quality of his hair, but the texture and quality of his soul, so he could now cry out with eloquent force. Fleecy locks and black complexion cannot scoff at nature’s claim, skin may differ but affection dwells in white and black the same. “Were I so tall as to reach the pole, or grasp the ocean with my span, It must be measured by my soul, the mind is the standard of man.”<sup>2</sup>

With this new sense of dignity, with this new self respect, the Negro decided to rise up against this old order of segregation and discrimination. Then came May 17, 1954 in the same Supreme Court of the nation, passed unanimously the decision stating that the old “Separate Doctrine” must go now, that separate facilities

---

2. These lines are a composite of passages from William Cowper’s “The Negro’s Complaint” (1788) and Isaac Watts’s “False Greatness” (1706). See note 5 to the “The ‘New Negro’ of the South: Behind the Montgomery Story,” June 1956, p.283 in this volume.

1956 are inherently unequal and that this segregation, therefore, on the basis of his race is to deny him equal protection of the law. With this decision we have been able to see the gradual death of the old order of segregation and discrimination.

We now see the new order of integration emerging on the horizon. Let nobody fool you, all the loud noises we hear today in terms of nullification and interposition are nothing but the death groans of the dying system. The old order is passing away, the new order is coming into being. But whenever there is anything new there are new responsibilities. As we think of this coming new world we must think of the challenge that we confront and the new responsibilities that stand before us. We must prepare to live in a new world.

I would like to suggest some things that we must do to live in this new world, to prepare to live in it, the challenges that confront us. The first thing is this, that we must rise above the narrow confines of our individualistic concerns, with a broader concern for all humanity. You see, this new world is a world of geographical togetherness. No individual can afford to live alone now. The nation cannot live alone for we have been brought together. This has been done certainly by modern man with great scientific insight. Man through his scientific genius has been able to draw distance and save time and space. He has been able to carry highways through the stratosphere. We read just the other day that a rocket plane went 1900 miles in one hour. Twice as fast as the speed of sound. This is the new age. Bob Hope has described this new age, this jet age; it is an age in which planes will be moving so fast that we will have a non-stop flight from New York to Los Angeles, when you start out you might develop the hiccups and you will hic in New York and cup in Los Angeles. This is an age in which it will be possible to leave Tokyo on a Sunday morning and arrive in Seattle, Washington on the preceding Saturday night. When your friends meet you at the airport and ask what time did you leave Tokyo, you will have to say I left tomorrow. That is this new age. We live in one world geographically. We face the great problem of making it one spiritually.

Through our scientific means we have made of the world a neighborhood and now the challenge confronts us through our moral and spiritual means to make of it a brotherhood. We must live together, we are not independent we are interdependent. We are all involved in a single process. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly for we are tied together in a single progress. We are all linked in the great chain of humanity. As one man said, that no man is an Island, entirely of himself. Every man is a piece of a continent and a part of a main. I am involved in mankind, therefore we will not send to know for whom the bells toll, they toll for thee.<sup>3</sup> We must discover that and live by it . . . if we are to live meaningfully in this one world that is emerging. But not only that, we must be able to achieve excellency in our various fields of endeavor. In this new world doors will be opening that were not open in the old world. Opportunities will come now that did

---

3. These three sentences are from John Donne's poem "Devotions upon Emergent Occasions" (1624). In later speeches King included longer quotations from the poem. See, for example, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," 3 December 1956, pp. 456-457 in this volume.

not come in the past and the next challenge confronting us is to be prepared for these opportunities as they come.

We must prepare ourselves in every field of human endeavor. We must extend our interest and we must accomplish a great deal now to be prepared for these doors to be open. There are so many things, so many areas we need to be prepared in. We need more ingenuity. We have been relatively content with the relatively material possessions such as medicine, teaching, and law. All of these are noble and gracious but we must prepare ourselves. Doors will be opening in all of these areas and we need people, we need more kinds who can qualify in the area of engineering, more architects and even more in the medical profession. We need to do more in the area of specialization now because the opportunities are coming and we must be prepared. In this new world we can now compete with people, not Negro people. We must not go out to be a good Negro barber, a good Negro lawyer, a good Negro teacher, we will have to compete with people. We must go out to do the job. Ralph Waldo Emerson said in an Essay back in 1878 that, "If a man can write better books or preach a better sermon or make a better mouse trap than his neighbor, even if he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door."<sup>4</sup> That will be increasingly true. We must be ready. We must confront the opportunities and we must be ready to go into these doors as they open.

No matter what area and all fields, we should be ready. We need more skilled laborers. We need more people who are competent in all areas and always remember that the important thing is to do a good job. No matter what it is. Whatever you are doing consider it as something having cosmic significance, as it is a part of the uplifting of humanity. No matter what it is, no matter how small you think it is, do it right. As someone said, do it so well that the living, dead, or the unborn could do it no better.<sup>5</sup> If your son grows up to be a street cleaner, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry, sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, "here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well". If you can't be a pine on the top of the hill be a shrub on the side, but be the best shrub on the side of the hill. Be a bush if you can't be a tree, if you can't be a highway be a trail, if you can't be the sun be a star. It isn't by size that you win or you fail. Be the best of whatever you are and that is the second challenge, that we confront the issues of today and prepare to live in this new age.<sup>6</sup>

There is a third and basic challenge. We must prepare to go into this new age without bitterness. That is a temptation that is a danger to all of those of us who have lived for many years under the yoke of oppression and those of us who have

---

4. The source of this quotation, often attributed to Emerson, is uncertain; see note 6 to "Mother's Day in Montgomery," 18 May 1956, p. 266 in this volume.

5. When giving this speech to an Atlanta audience, King attributed the quotation to Benjamin Mays (see King, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," 1 January 1957, Paul H. Brown Collection, in private hands).

6. King paraphrases the poem "Be the Best of Whatever You Are" (1926) by Douglas Malloch.

1956

been confronted with injustice, those of us who have lived under the evils of segregation and discrimination, will go into the new age with bitterness and indulging in hate campaigns. We cannot do it that way. For if we do it that way, it will be just a perpetuation of the old way. We must conquer the hate of the old age and the love of the new age and go into the new age with the love that is understanding for all men, to have with it a forgiving attitude, it has with it something that will cause you to look deep down within every man and see within him something of Godliness. That something that will cause you to stand up before him and love him.

As we move in this transition from the old age into the new we will have to rise up in protest. We will have to boycott at times, but let us always remember that boycotts are not ends within themselves. A boycott is just a means to an end. A boycott is merely a means to say, "I don't like it." It is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor but the end is reconciliation. The end is the creation of a beloved community.

The end is the creation of a society where men will live together as brothers. An end is not retaliation but redemption. That is the end we are trying to reach. That we would bring these creative forces together we would be able to live in this new age which is destined to come. The old order is dying and the new order is being born. You know, all of this tells us something about the meaning of the universe. It tells something about something that stands in the center of the cosma, it says something to us about this, that justice eventually rules in this world. This reminds us that the forces of darkness cannot permanently conquer the forces of light and this is the thing that we must live by. This is the hope that all men of goodwill live by, the belief that justice will triumph in the universe and the fact that the old order is passing away and a new order is being born is an eternal reminder of that truth that stands at the center of our faith.

It is something there that says this, that iniquity may occupy the throne of force but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant Jesus on the throne of Egypt. It says to us that evil may prevail again and the Caesar will occupy the palace and Christ the cross, but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C. so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by His name. There is something in this universe that justified Carlisle in saying, "No lie can live forever." There is something in the universe that justifies James Russell Lowell in saying, "Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, yet that scaffold weighs the future and behind the demon, Wrong, stands God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own." There is something in the universe that justified William C. Bryant in saying, "Truth crushed down will rise again." That is the meaning of this new age that is emerging. This is the hope that we can live by.

Now I am about to close, but I cannot close without giving a warning signal. I have talked a great deal about this coming new age, about this age that is passing away and about this age that is now coming into being. There is a danger that after listening to that you will become the victims of an optimism covered with superficiality. An optimism which says in substance we can sit down now and do nothing because this new age is inevitable. We can sit down and wait for the rolling in of the wheels of inevitability, we don't need to do anything, it's coming anyway. We cannot be complacent. We cannot sit idly by and wait for the coming

of the inevitable. I would urge you not to take that attitude for it might be true that this new age is inevitable but we can speed it up, the coming of the new age. It might be true that old man segregation is on his deathbed but history has proven that social systems have a great last minute breathing power. The vanguards and the guardians of the status quo are always on hand with their obstacles in an attempt to keep the old order alive. So that we are not to think that segregation will die without an effort and working against it. Segregation is still a reality in America. We still confront it in the South and it is blaring in conspicuous forms. We still confront it in the North in its hidden and subtle form. But if democracy is to live, segregation must die. Segregation is evil, segregation is against the will of the Almighty God, segregation is opposed to everything that democracy stands for, segregation is nothing but slavery covered up with the niceties of complexities. So we must continue to work against it.

We must continue to stand up, we must gain the ballot—that is important—we cannot overlook the importance of the ballot. By gaining the ballot we will gain political power and doing that we will be able to persuade the Executive and Legislative branches of the government to follow the examples so courageously set by the Judicial clan. We must continue to get the ballot. We must continue to work through legislation and that is an important avenue, we can never overlook that. It may be true that they cannot make them live more moral, that might be true, I don't know. But that never was the intention of the law anyway. The law doesn't seek so much to change a man's internal feelings but it seeks to control the external effect of those internal feelings. So that we must continue to support the N.A.A.C.P. which has done such a noble and courageous job in this area. They may try to outlaw this organization in Alabama and Louisiana but it still remains true that this is the greatest organization in the nation working for the Civil Rights of our people.

Then, in order to gain this freedom and to move away from the cycles of segregation we have got to go down in our pockets and give some money. I assure you that integration is not some lavish gift that the white man will pass out on a silver platter while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite. If we are to gain it we have got to work for it, we have got to sacrifice for it. We have got to pay for it. We cannot use the excuse any more that we don't have the money. The national income of the Negro now is more than 16 billion dollars, more than the national income of Canada. We have the money, we can do it. We have it for everything else that we want. We have the biggest and the finest cars in the world and we can spend it for all those frivolities, now let us use our money for something lasting, not merely for extravagances. I am not the preacher that would condemn social life and recreational activities—those are important aspects of life—but I would urge you not to put any of these things before this pressing and urgent problem of Civil Rights. We must spend our money not merely for the adolescent and transitory things, but this eternal, lasting something that we call freedom.

Finally, in order to do this job we have got to have more dedicated, consecrated, intelligent and sincere leadership. This is a tense period through which we are passing, this period of transition and there is a need all over the nation for leaders to carry on. Leaders who can somehow sympathize with and calm us and at the same time have a positive quality. We have got to have leaders of this sort who will stand by courageously and yet not run off with emotion. We need

1956 leaders not in love with money but in love with justice. Not in love with publicity but in love with humanity. Leaders who can subject their particular egos to the pressing urgencies of the great cause of freedom. God give us leaders. A time like this demands great leaders. Leaders whom the fog of life cannot chill, men whom the lust of office cannot buy. Leaders who have honor, leaders who will not lie. Leaders who will stand before a pagan god and damn his treacherous flattery.<sup>7</sup>

God grant from this noble assembly, this noble assembly of fraternity men some of the leaders of our nation will emerge. God has blessed you, he has blessed you with great intellectual resources and those of you who represent the intellectual powers of our race. God has blessed many of you with great wealth and never forget that those resources came from people in the back doing a little job in a big way. Never forget that you are where you are today because the masses have helped you get there and they stand now out in the wilderness, not being able to speak for themselves, they stand walking the streets in protest just not knowing exactly what to do and the techniques. They are waiting for somebody out in the midst of the wilderness of life to stand up and speak and take a stand for them.

God grant that the resources that you have will be used to do that, the great resources of education, the resources of wealth and that we will be able to move into this new world, a world in which men will live together as brothers; a world in which men will no longer take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. A world in which men will throw down the sword and live by the higher principle of love. The time when we shall be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daylight of freedom and justice. That there will be the time we will be able to stand before the universe and say with joy—The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and our Christ! And he shall reign forever and ever! Hallelujah!<sup>8</sup>

PD. In *The Golden Anniversary Story of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, 1906–1956*, ed. Charles Wesley (Chicago: Alpha Phi Alpha, 1956), pp. 85–90; copy in MLKP-MBU: Box 10.

---

7. Cf. Josiah Gilbert Holland's "Wanted" (1872), in *Garnered Sheaves: The Complete Poetical Works of J. G. Holland* (New York: Scribner/Armstrong, 1873), p. 377: "God give us men! A time like this demands / Strong minds, great hearts, true faith, and ready hands; / Men whom the lust of office does not kill; / Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy; / Men who possess opinions and a will; / Men who have honor,—men who will not lie; / Men who can stand before a demagogue, / And damn his treacherous flatteries without winking!" In a 3 December 1956 speech that included these lines, King noted that he was paraphrasing Holland (see "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," p. 461 in this volume). See also King's use of Holland's poem in "Desegregation and the Future," 15 December 1956, p. 477 in this volume.

8. Revelations 11:15.