

Statement on Ending the Bus Boycott

20 December 1956

[Montgomery, Ala.]

King reads a prepared statement to about 2,500 persons attending mass meetings at Holt Street and First Baptist Churches.¹ He urges "the Negro citizens of Montgomery to return to the busses tomorrow morning on a non-segregated basis." An audience question about segregated benches downtown prompted King to acknowledge that the Supreme Court ruling applied only on city buses.² A Birmingham News account of the meetings reported that he admitted "it is true we got more out of this (boycott) than we went in for. We started out to get modified segregation (on buses) but we got total integration."³ At six A.M. the following morning King joined E. D. Nixon, Ralph

1. King later remembered that he had "carefully prepared [the statement] in the afternoon" before the meeting. It is reprinted in its entirety in *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 170–172. See also Excerpt, Statement on End of Bus Boycott, 20 December 1956.

2. Edward Pilley, "Acquiescence Keynote to Officials' 'Reaction,'" *Montgomery Advertiser*, 21 December 1956.

3. King, quoted in "Negro Woman Says She Was Slapped After Leaving Bus," *Birmingham News*, 21 December 1956.

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*Abernathy, and Glenn Smiley on one of the first integrated buses. During the initial day of desegregated bus seating there were only a few instances of verbal abuse and occasional violence. The Montgomery Advertiser reported: "The calm but cautious acceptance of this significant change in Montgomery's way of life came without any major disturbances."*⁴

For more than twelve months now, we, the Negro citizens of Montgomery have been engaged in a non-violent protest against injustices and indignities experienced on city buses. We came to see that, in the long run, it is more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation. So in a quiet dignified manner, we decided to substitute tired feet for tired souls, and walk the streets of Montgomery until the sagging walls of injustice had been crushed by the battering rams of surging justice.

Often our movement has been referred to as a boycott movement. The word boycott, however, does not adequately describe the true spirit of our movement. The word boycott is suggestive of merely an economic squeeze devoid of any positive value. We have never allowed ourselves to get bogged in the negative; we have always sought to accentuate the positive. Our aim has never been to put the bus company out of business, but rather to put justice in business.

These twelve months have not at all been easy. Our feet have often been tired. We have struggle against tremendous odds to maintain alternative transportation. There have been moments when roaring waters of disappointment poured upon us in staggering torrents. We can remember days when unfavorable court decisions came upon us like tidal waves, leaving us treading in the deep and confused waters of despair. But amid all of this we have kept going with the faith that as we struggle, God struggles with us, and that the arc of the moral universe, although long, is bending toward justice.⁵ We have lived under the agony and darkness of Good Friday with the conviction that one day the heightening glow of Easter would emerge on the horizon. We have seen truth crucified and goodness buried, but we have kept going with the conviction that truth crushed to earth will rise again.⁶

Now our faith seems to be vindicated. This morning the long awaited mandate from the United States Supreme Court concerning bus segregation came to Montgomery. This mandate expresses in terms that are crystal clear that segregation in public transportation is both legally and sociologically invalid. In the light of this mandate and the unanimous vote rendered by the Montgomery Improvement Association about a month ago, the year old protest against city busses

4. Bob Ingram, "Segregation Ends Quietly on Bus Line," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 22 December 1956.

5. This phrase, which became commonplace in King's oratory, may have come to his attention through John Haynes Holmes, "Salute to Montgomery," *Liberation* 1, no. 10 (December 1956): 5: "The great Theodore Parker, abolitionist preacher in the days before the Civil War, answered this doubt and fear when he challenged an impatient world, 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.'"

6. This line is from the poem *The Battlefield* (1839) by William Cullen Bryant.

is officially called off, and the Negro citizens of Montgomery are urged to return to the busses tomorrow morning on a non-segregated basis.

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I cannot close without giving just a word of caution. Our experience and growth during this past year of united non-violent protest has been of such that we cannot be satisfied with a court "victory" over our white brothers. We must respond to the decision with an understanding of those who have oppressed us and with an appreciation of the new adjustments that the court order poses for them. We must be able to face up honestly to our own shortcomings. We must act in such a way as to make possible a coming together of white people and colored people on the basis of a real harmony of interests and understanding. We seek an integration based on mutual respect.

This is the time that we must evince calm dignity and wise restraint. Emotions must not run wild. Violence must not come from any of us, for if we become victimized with violent intents, we will have walked in vain, and our twelve months of glorious dignity will be transformed into an eve of gloomy catastrophe. As we go back to the busses let us be loving enough to turn an enemy into a friend. We must now move from protest to reconciliation. It is my firm conviction that God is working in Montgomery. Let all men of goodwill, both Negro and white, continue to work with Him. With this dedication we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.