

“The Role of the Church in Facing
the Nation’s Chief Moral Dilemma,”
Address Delivered on 25 April 1957 at
the Conference on Christian Faith
and Human Relations in Nashville

[1957]

Black Mountain, N.C.

The day after receiving the Social Justice Award from the Religion and Labor Foundation in New York, King addressed the final morning session of the Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations.¹ The conference, a three-day event

1. After accepting the award in New York, King offered reflections on the state of race relations (King, “This Is a Great Time to Be Alive,” 24 April 1957). The speech was later published as “At the Threshold of Integration,” *Economic Justice* 25 (June–July 1957): 1, 7–8; excerpts also appeared as “A View of the Dawn,” *Interracial Review* 30 (May 1957): 82–85.

designed to explore the role of southern religious organizations in alleviating racial tensions, was cosponsored by the Tennessee Council of Churches and the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen (FSC). Approximately three hundred ministers attended the conference, which featured addresses by Blake Smith, pastor of the integrated University Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, and Benjamin Mays of Morehouse College.²

In this address King outlines several ways the church can help solve the nation's racial problems and calls upon his audience to be "maladjusted" to the "evils of segregation. . . the madness of militarism and the self-defeating method of physical violence." In a 24 May letter, conference organizer Howard Kester thanked King for his "memorable" speech: "Your message more than fulfilled our fondest hopes and I am confident that it will bear rich fruit both now and in the years to come."³ The speech was published in the "Proceedings of the Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations."⁴

There can be no gain saying of the fact America has brought the world to an awe-inspiring threshold of the future. As one studies the majestic sweep of American history, he cannot help but be astounded and fascinated by the tremendous progress that has been made in so many areas. The scientific and technological advances made by this Nation still astound and stagger the imagination. Through our technological genius, we have been able to construct skyscrapers in buildings with their prodigious towers steeping heavenward. Through our advances in medical science, we have been able to cure many dread plagues and diseases, and thereby prolong our lives and make for greater security and physical well-being. Through the scientific ingenuity of the Wright brothers, the airplane was invented. With this instrument, we have been able to dwarf distance and place time in chains. Yes, we have been able to carve highways through the stratosphere. Through nuclear energy, we are delving into the mysteries of the creation of matter. Not only have we made great progress in the area of technology and science, but we have made unprecedented strides in the area of economic growth. We have been able to build the greatest system of production that the world has ever known. Our material wealth astounds the world, and has catapulted our Na-

2. Program, Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations, 23-25 April 1957; James Carty, "Aid Integration Churches Urged," *Nashville Tennessean*, 24 April 1957.

3. King replied on 31 May: "It seems to me that we must do more of this type of thing if we are to solve the tremendous problem that faces us in the South. I still have faith in the church and the Christian ministry, and if the problem is solved the church must stand at the forefront of the struggle." Howard A. Kester (1904-1977), born in Martinsville, Virginia, received an A.B. (1925) from Lynchburg College and a B.D. (1931) from Vanderbilt University School of Religion. During the 1930s and 1940s, Kester was active in the Socialist Party, investigated lynchings for the NAACP, and worked as an organizer for the biracial Southern Tenant Farmers Union. He was a founder and executive secretary (1948-1957) of the FSC, a group seeking to make white clergy more responsive to social issues.

4. In the foreword to the published proceedings, Kester praised King's remarks: "What man who heard Martin Luther King had not to tie his hands to keep them from applauding, who did not bite his tongue to keep it from uttering a mighty Hallelu[j]ah, Amen, and who knew when the final word was spoken that only silence could bespeak the thoughts of the heart" (Kester, Foreword, "Proceedings of the Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations," 23-25 April 1957).

1957 tion into the greatest political power on earth. All of this is a dazzling picture of U.S.A. 1957.

But there is another side of our national life which is not so bright. In the midst of all of our scientific and technological advances, we still suffer the plague of racial conflict. We have not learned the simple art of loving our neighbors, and respecting the dignity and worth of all human personality. Through our scientific genius, we have made of the world, a neighborhood, but through our moral and spiritual geniuses, we have failed to make of our own Nation a brotherhood. This is the chief moral dilemma of our Nation. This tragic dilemma which we now confront leaves the nation and the Church with a tremendous challenge. The broad universalism standing at the center of the Gospel makes brotherhood morally inescapable. Racial segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we have in Christ. Segregation is a tragic evil which is utterly un-Christian. There are at least three reasons why segregation is evil. First, segregation inevitably makes for inequality. There was a time that we sought to live with segregation. In 1896, the Supreme Court of this Nation, through the famous *Plessy V. Ferguson* decision, established the doctrine of separate-but-equal as the law of the land. The enforcement of this *Plessy* doctrine ended up making for tragic inequality and ungodly exploitation. There was a strict enforcement of the "separate" with not the slightest intention to abide by the "equal". So the old *Plessy* doctrine ended up plunging the Negro across the abyss of exploitation where he experienced the bleakness of nagging injustice.

But even if it had been possible to provide the Negro with equal facilities, in terms of external construction and quantitative distribution, we would still confront inequality. Even if it were possible to provide Negro children with the same number of schools and the same type of buildings as the white students possess, there would still be inequality in the sense that the students could not communicate with each other. Equality is not only a matter of quantity but of quality; not merely of mathematics and geometry, but of psychology. The Supreme Court was eminently correct in saying the separate facilities are inherently unequal.

A second reason why segregation is evil is because it scars the soul of both the segregator and the segregated. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and it gives the segregated a false sense of inferiority. This is why every Negro parent must continually remind his child that he is somebody, for he is the victim of a system that forever stares him in the face saying "you are less than"—"you are not equal to". Segregation is evil because it brings about a tragic distortion of human personality.⁵

A third reason why segregation is evil is the fact that it ends up depersonalizing the segregated. The segregator looks upon the segregated as a thing to be used, not a person to be respected. He is considered a mere cog in a vast economic machine. This is what makes segregation utterly un-Christian. It substitutes an "I—it" relationship for the "I—thou" relationship.⁶ The segregator relegates the segregated to the status of a thing, rather than elevate him to the status of a person.

5. Cf. Benjamin Mays, "The Moral Aspects of Segregation," in *Three Views of the Segregation Decisions* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1956), p. 15.

6. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1937).

The Philosophy of Christianity is strongly opposed to the underlying philosophy of segregation.

Therefore, every Christian is confronted with the basic responsibility of working courageously for a non-segregated society. The task of conquering segregation is an inescapable *must* confronting the Christian Churches. Much progress has been made toward the goal of a non-segregated society, but we are still far from the promised land. Segregation still persists as a reality.

The churches are called upon to recognize the urgent necessity of taking a forthright stand on this crucial issue. If we are to remain true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we cannot rest until segregation and discrimination are banished from every area of American life. It has always been the responsibility of the Church to broaden horizons, challenge the status quo, and break the mores when necessary. Such was the role of Amos and Jeremiah, of Jesus and Paul, of the early Church, of Savonarola and Martin Luther, of Livingston and Schweitzer.⁷

There are several specific things that the Church can do in making brotherhood a reality. First, the Church should try to get to the ideational roots of race hate. All race prejudice is based upon suspicion, fears, and misunderstandings, most of which are groundless. The popular mind urgently needs direction here. Not only is the mind left confused by certain frictions that arise out of the ordinary contact of diverse human groups, but we are afflicted by the activities of the professional hate groups, that is, through the activities of leaders of racist movements, who gain prominence and power by the dissemination of false ideas, and by deliberately appealing to the deepest hate responses within the human mind. These two forces—ordinary antagonisms and abnormally aroused fears—keep the popular mind in such a state of confusion and excitement that they are unconsciously lead to acts of meanness and oppression.

The church can show the unreasonableness of these popular beliefs. It can show that the idea of a superior or inferior race is a myth that has been refuted by the best evidence of the anthropological sciences. It can show that Negroes are not innately inferior in academic, health and moral standards are products of environment, not of race.⁸ Slums and poverty breed germs and immorality, whatever racial group may occupy them. It can show that when given opportunities, Negroes do as well as anyone else. It can show that the Negro is no worse and no better than any other element in the National population.

The Church can help by showing that Negroes do not want to dominate the Nation. They simply want the right to live as first-class citizens, with all the responsibilities that good citizenship entails. The Church can help by showing that the continual outcry of inter-marriage is a tragic distortion of the real issue. It can show that the Negro's primary aim is to be the white man's brother, and not his brother-in-law. Many Churchmen are already aware of these things, but the truth

7. The Italian preacher and reformer Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) was martyred for his crusade against government tyranny and church corruption. King also refers to Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone (1813–1898) and German missionary doctor, philosopher, and 1952 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965).

8. In King's handwritten draft of this speech, he ends this sentence with "standards" and begins his next sentence with "It has been proven that low academic, health, and moral standards are products of environment, not of race" (King, Draft, "The Role of the Church," 25 April 1957).

1957 is so widely distorted by the hate groups that it needs to be reiterated over and over again.

Another thing that the Church can do in the area of race relations, is to keep men's minds and visions centered on God. As I said a moment ago, many of the present problems which we confront can be explained in terms of fear. So many irrational fears have cropped up around the question of integration that have no basis in reality. I have come to see that we not only have the job of freeing the Negro from the bondage of segregation, but we also have the responsibility of freeing our white brother from the bondage of crippling fears. One of the best ways to rid ourselves of fear is to center our lives in the will and purposes of God.

In dealing with the race problem our thinking is so often anthropocentric rather than theocentric. The question which is usually asked is—"What will my neighbors think if I am too liberal on the race question"—"What will my friends think if I am too friendly to Negroes." Somehow men forget to ask the question—"What will God think." And so men live in fear because they are bogged down on the horizontal plane with only a modicum of devotion to the vertical.

The Church must remind men, once more, that God is the answer, and that man finds greater security in devoting his life to the eternal demands of the Almighty God, than in giving his ultimate allegiance to the transitory evanescent demands of man. The Church must continually say to Christians, "ye are a colony of heaven."⁹ This means that although we live in the colony of time, our ultimate allegiance is to the empire of eternity. We have a dual citizenry. We live both in time and eternity; both in heaven and earth. Therefore, we owe our ultimate allegiance to God. It is this love for God and devotion to his will that casteth out fear.

A third thing that the Church can do in attempting to solve the race problem is to take the lead in strong Christian social action. It is not enough for the Church to be active in the ideological direction; it must also move out into the arena of social action. The first act in this area should be the Church's determination to purge its own body of discriminatory practices. Only by doing this can the Church be effective in its attack on outside evils. Most of the major denominations practice segregation in local Churches, in Church hospitals, Church schools, and other Church institutions. It is appalling, indeed, that 11 O'clock on Sunday morning, when we stand to sing "In Christ there is no East nor West" is the most segregated hour in Christian America. It is true that there has been progress in this area. Here and there Churches are courageously making attacks on this system. But in most cases the attacks are local and independent. They are not yet the work of the Church as a whole. So the Church has an internal problem that it must cure.

The Church must become increasingly active in social action outside itself. It must seek to keep channels of communication open between the Negro and white community. Men hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they are separated from each other. And only by keeping the channels of communication open can we know each other.

In the area of social action the Church must take an active stand against the injustices that Negroes confront in city and county courts of many southern towns.

Here the Negro is robbed openly with little hope of redress. He is fined and jailed often in defiance of law.

Another area in which the influence of the Church is much needed but little felt is that of the economic order. The disadvantages that Negroes suffer in this area are startling indeed. In many fields they cannot get jobs at all; in others they are employed at appallingly low rates. This is a tragic end. It is murder in the first degree. It is strangulation of the moral, physical, and cultural development of the victims. So long as these blatant inequalities exist in the economic order our nation can never come to its full moral, economic and political maturity. As guardian of the moral and spiritual life of the community the Church cannot look with indifference upon this glaring evil.

I must say just a word concerning the dire need for sincere, dedicated, and courageous leadership from individual Christians. It is my profound hope that more leadership will come from the moderates in the white south. Unfortunately, the leadership from the white south today all too often stems from the close-minded reactionaries. But it is my firm belief that this close-minded, reactionary, recalcitrant group constitutes a numerical minority. There is in the white south more open-minded moderates than appears on the surface. These persons are silent today because of fear of social, political, and economic reprisals. God grant that the white moderates of the south will rise up courageously, without fear, and take over the leadership of the south in this tense period of transition.

The nation is looking to the white ministers of the south for much of this leadership. Every minister of the gospel has a mandate to stand up courageously for righteousness, to proclaim the eternal verities of the gospel, and to lead men from the desolate midnight of falsehood to the bright daybreak of truth. I am aware of the difficulties that many white ministers confront when they take a stand in the area of human relations. But in spite of these difficulties the Christian minister must remember that he is a citizen of two worlds. Not only must he answer to the mores, but he must give account to God. He must again and again hear the words of Paul ringing across the centuries: "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."¹⁰

I am not unmindful of the fact that many white ministers in the south have already acted. Many such ministers are here today. I have nothing but praise for those ministers of the gospel who have stood unflinchingly amid threats and intimidation, inconvenience and unpopularity, and even at times amid sheer physical danger. There is nothing, to my mind, more majestic and sublime than the determined courage of an individual willing to suffer and sacrifice for truth. For such noble servants of God there is the consolation of the words of Jesus: "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute and say all manner of evil against you, falsely, for my sake; rejoice and be exceedingly glad; for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."¹¹

It is also necessary to stress the urgent need for strong, sincere and dedicated leadership from the Negro community. In this period of transition and growing social change, there is a dire need for leaders who are calm and yet positive. This is no day for the rabble-rouser, whether he be Negro or white. We must realize

10. Romans 12:2.

11. Matthew 5:11-12.

1957 that we are grappling with one of the most weighty social problems of the century, and in grappling with such a problem there is no place for misguided emotionalism. We need a leadership that will stress the necessity for keeping our hands clean as we struggle for freedom and justice. We must not struggle with falsehood, hate, malice or violence. We must never become bitter. We must never succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle, for if this happens unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness and our chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos. There is still a voice crying through the vista of time saying to every potential Peter, "put up your sword."¹² History is replete with the bleached bones of nations and communities that failed to follow this command.

The Negro leader must stress the fact that the aim of the Negro should never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must make it clear that it is injustice which we seek to defeat and not persons who may happen to be unjust. We have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization. Our motto must be, "Freedom and justice through love." Not through violence; not through hate; no not even through boycotts; but through love. As we struggle for freedom in America it may be necessary to boycott at times. But we must remember as we boycott that a boycott is not an end within itself; it is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority. But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. The type of love that I stress here is not *eros*, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not *philia*, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is *agape* which is understanding goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of men. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization. God grant that the leadership of the Negro race will remain true to these basic principles. To paraphrase the words of Holland:

God give us leaders!
 A time like this demands great leaders;
 Leaders whom the lust of office does not kill;
 Leaders whom the spoils of life cannot buy;
 Leaders who possess opinions and a will;
 Leaders who have honor; leaders who will not lie.
 Leaders who can stand before a demagogue and damn his
 treacherous flatteries without winking!
 Tall leaders, sun crowned, who live above the fog
 in public duty and private thinking.¹³

There are certain technical words in the vocabulary of every academic discipline which tend to become stereotypes and cliches. Psychologists have a word which is probably used more frequently than any other word in modern psychology. It is the word "maladjusted." This word is the ringing cry of the new child psychology. Now in a sense all of us must live the well adjusted life in order to avoid

12. John 18:11.

13. King paraphrases Josiah Gilbert Holland's "Wanted" (1872).

neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But there are some things in our social system to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I suggest that you too ought to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to the viciousness of mob-rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic inequalities of an economic system which take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating method of physical violence. I call upon you to be maladjusted. The challenge to you is to be maladjusted—as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who in the midst of the injustices of his day, could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, “Let judgment run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream”;¹⁴ as maladjusted as Lincoln, who had the vision to see that this nation could not survive half slave and half free; as maladjusted as Jefferson, who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery could cry out in words lifted to cosmic proportions, “All men are created equal, and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” As maladjusted as Jesus who dared to dream a dream of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men. The world is in desperate need of such maladjustment.¹⁵

In closing let me urge each of you to keep faith in the future. Let us realize that as we struggle for righteousness we do not struggle alone, but God struggles with us. The God that we worship is not some Aristotelian unmoved mover who contemplates merely upon himself; He is not merely a self-knowing God, but an other loving God. He is working through history for the establishment of his kingdom. There is an event at the center of our faith that reminds us of this. Just last Sunday we celebrated this event. It comes as an eternal reminder to us that Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the drums of Easter. Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a 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. This is our hope. One day, by the grace of God, we will be able to sing, “the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever, Hallelujah, Hallelujah!”¹⁶

PD. *Proceedings of the Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations* (Black Mountain, N.C.: Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, 1957), pp. 29–33; copy in HAK-NcU.

14. Amos 5:24.

15. King's discussion of “maladjustment” reflects the influence of minister Harry Emerson Fosdick, who wrote of a prisoner of conscience who refused to be “well-adjusted to a state of society that denied” religious liberty: “He was deliberately maladjusted to that.” Fosdick applauded socially conscious people who confront injustice: “To war, to the evils of predatory economics, to racial prejudice, totalitarian dictatorship, or whatever other social ill confronts them, they refuse comfortably to adjust themselves” (*On Being a Real Person* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943], pp. 205–206). In an earlier passage Fosdick asserted that the “deepest obligation of a Christian” was to be “maladjusted to the status quo” (*The Hope of the World* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1933], p. 112). King frequently used this theme in his oratory (see for example, King, “Techniques of Persuasion in the Montgomery Bus Boycott,” 24 June 1957; see also King, “The ‘New Negro’ of the South: Behind the Montgomery Story,” June 1956, in *Papers* 3:280–286).

16. Revelation 11:15.