

To James W. Morgan

15 July 1958  
Atlanta, Ga.

450

*On 29 June Fred Shuttlesworth's Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham narrowly escaped a devastating bomb blast, the second in less than two years. A passerby*

15 July  
1958

*noticed the bomb in front of the church and notified a volunteer watchman, who placed the bomb in the middle of the street; the ensuing explosion broke windows and shook homes for several blocks.<sup>1</sup> Two weeks later King urges Birmingham's mayor to see that those responsible are brought to justice: "The marked failure to ferret out the dynamiters . . . apparently must be attributed to a lack of will and determination to prosecute law breakers if their acts, however violent, serve to bulwark the bastions of racial segregation."<sup>2</sup>*

Hon. James W. Morgan<sup>3</sup>  
Mayor of the City of Birmingham  
City Hall  
Birmingham, Alabama

Dear Mayor Morgan:

Law abiding citizens throughout the nation were shocked to learn that, at about 1:30 o'clock, Sunday morning, June 29, another sneak attempt was made to dynamite the Bethel Baptist Church, 3191-29th Avenue, of which Rev. F. L. Shuttlesworth is pastor.

On the scene observers report that the violence of the blast broke windows in a four block area, jarred plaster from walls of the church, and blew out several of its windows and doors. The building itself was saved from possible demolition only because Mr. Will Hall, one of the men who voluntarily guard the church, risked his life by removing the smoking package, said to contain 15 to 20 sticks of dynamite, from in front of the church and putting it in the street. This act of bravery was made possible because a young woman, Miss Laverne Williams, who was coming from work saw a man place an object against the church and drive away under cover of darkness. Through her thoughtfulness the church guards were alerted and the probable deaths of several men averted.

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1. Volunteer guards had patrolled the church since it was first bombed on 25 December 1956.

2. Statements by Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor and a police informant later revealed the Birmingham police department's connection to the bombing. Following a failed attack on Birmingham's Temple Beth-El in late April, former Klansman William Hugh Morris informed Connor that white supremacist lawyer J. B. Stoner was behind the bombing attempt. With Morris's cooperation, Connor set up a sting operation to apprehend Stoner, explaining: "We asked him could he get Stoner to come to Birmingham and talk to our detectives, whom we were going to claim were interested in having some place in Birmingham bombed." Two undercover detectives met with Stoner and Morris on 21 June, and Morris later recalled that during the meeting "they may have agreed on Shuttlesworth's church to be bombed." Following the bombing at Bethel Baptist on 29 June, Stoner reportedly contacted Morris in order to obtain money that had been offered by the undercover officers (Connor, Statement on bombing at Bethel Baptist Church, 16 July 1958; Morris, Interview by Bob Eddy and John East, 29 June 1977).

In May 1980, despite his insistence that he had been set up by the Birmingham police, Stoner was convicted of the 1958 Bethel Church bombing and sentenced to a ten-year prison term (Frederick Allen, "Stoner Claims 'Tom Cook' Urged Him to Bomb Church," *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 October 1977; David Morrison, "Stoner Convicted in Bombing," *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 May 1980).

3. James W. Morgan (1891-1971) was born in Birmingham, Alabama. A local businessman, Morgan was elected Commissioner of Public Improvements in 1937, and after four consecutive terms he was elected mayor in 1953. Morgan, who became known as "Mr. Birmingham," retired in 1961.

15 July  
1958

Two weeks have passed and as far as we have been able to determine the culprits have not been arrested, nor is there any objective evidence that they will be soon. In sharp contrast, however, it appears that definite effort has been made to substantiate an implication that persons connected with the church were responsible for the explosion.

We understand that, at the suggestion of police officers, the young woman who sounded the alarm, the man who risked death to save the church, and at least three other Negro residents of the city have submitted to lie-detector tests. Could it be that those responsible for law-enforcement in Birmingham are more intent upon embarrassing and harassing Negroes who stand for interracial justice than in tracking down criminals?

We can but ponder this question since this is not the first time that the Bethel Baptist Church has been bombed. You will recall that it was almost destroyed in 1956, and that since then, its pastor, Rev. Shuttlesworth, has been the victim of repeated harassment and even a mob-attack.<sup>4</sup> Yet in no instance have those guilty of these acts of violence been punished.

In light of the advanced, scientific methods of crime detection, all of which, we are confident, are available to the Police Department of Birmingham, the marked failure to ferret out the dynamiters of churches and homes apparently must be attributed to a lack of will and determination to prosecute law breakers if their acts, however violent, serve to bulwark the bastions of racial segregation. The record of criminal bombings in Birmingham reaffirms the old truism. Namely, crime is like a disease—if not checked it will spread.

Emboldened by the obvious lack of prosecution for the 1956 bombing of the Bethel Baptist Church, the dynamiters recently crossed the color line and bombed a Jewish synagogue.<sup>5</sup> Prejudiced minds, may regard this lightly and try to dismiss it as involving “only Negroes and Jews.” But this plague will surely spread unless city and state officials take stern and vigorous action to ferret out and punish both those who traffic in the sale of explosives for criminal use and those who use them. No human lives have been destroyed, as yet; but Divine Providence will not always intervene.

The S.C.L.C. strongly advocates that only non-violent resistance be used in the Negro's struggle against racial injustices and discrimination. Equally as strongly must we protest the use of violence against those who seek to secure or exercise their civil rights. But our strongest voice will always be raised to point out that un-

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4. Shuttlesworth was brutally beaten on 9 September 1957, when he attempted to enroll four students, including two of his children, in Birmingham's all-white Phillips High School.

In a 9 August 1958 letter to Connor, Shuttlesworth protested “the repeated actions of the Police Department under your direction, in continuing to needlessly harass us and interfere as we try to prevent our Church and Parsonage from being bombed for a third time.” He cited several instances of police negligence and intimidation and noted: “Even as I write a '53 Pontiac, Mississippi Plate #392666 with a white man in it is continually circling the block. Up to 9:20 he has circled about 20 times. . . . We called the Police at once; but the Police Department never came out to investigate” (see also Shuttlesworth to Connor, 1 December 1958).

5. King refers to the failed 28 April 1958 attack on Birmingham's Temple Beth-El.

punished acts of violence and unchecked lawlessness is a fertile seed-bed for the complete break down of law and order.<sup>6</sup>

18 July  
1958

That is why, Mayor Morgan, we urgently ask you to determine at once and let us know what concrete steps have been taken by Police officials to apprehend and punish those who on June 29 attempted to bomb, for the second time, the Bethel Baptist Church.

May we look forward to your immediate reply.

Yours very truly,

[*signed*] Martin L. King, Jr.<sup>7</sup>

Rev. Martin L. King, Jr.

President

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6. Two days after King wrote this letter, a pair of homes in the "Dynamite Hill" section of Birmingham were bombed. A group of African-American residents attacked two white men found at the scene; the two, along with a third man they named, were later arrested and indicted (Emory O. Jackson, "Angry Citizens Beat Two Men Following Dynamitings," *Alabama Tribune*, 19 July 1958).

7. King's name is signed here by Ella Baker, who likely drafted this letter (Baker, Interview by Eugene P. Walker, 4 September 1974).