

Paul's Letter to American Christians,
Sermon Delivered to the Commission
on Ecumenical Missions and Relations,
United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.

[3 June 1958]
[Pittsburgh, Pa]

King began to deliver versions of this sermon, written as early as 1956, as national speaking opportunities increased¹ He uses the form of a New Testament Pauline epistle to challenge the American church, as Frederick Meek had done previously in his "A Letter to Christians"² King preached the following version at the inaugural convention of the newly established United Presbyterian Church, U S A He assumes Paul's voice and questions whether Americans' "spiritual progress has been commensurate with your scientific progress" King warns the gathered Presbyterian leaders against racial segregation within their church as well as the schisms and "narrow sectarianism" within Protestantism that threatens to destroy "the unity of the body of Christ" He concludes by urging those involved in the struggle for justice, white as well as black, to remain nonviolent and to grow in their capacity for love, even for the oppressor The following text is taken from an audio recording of the address

Mr Chairman, distinguished platform associates, ladies and gentlemen, I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here this morning and to be a part of this very rich fellowship I want to express my personal appreciation to the Board of Missions for extending this invitation and making it possible for me to share in this

¹ Charles W Kelly, pastor emeritus of Tuskegee's Greenwood Missionary Baptist Church, extolled King's 7 September 1956 delivery of this sermon at the seventy-sixth annual meeting of the National Baptist Convention in Denver, writing "You spoke as a prophet and seer which you are—The imaginative 'Letter from St Paul' to American Xns was as vivid and real as any of the Pauline Epistles" (Kelly to King, 8 September 1956, in *Papers* 3 366) King preached a nearly identical version of this sermon at Dexter the following November (King, "Paul's Letter to American Chrstians," Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 4 November 1956, in *Papers* 3 414–420) Between 1956 and 1962, he delivered this sermon at least fifteen times

² King annotated a copy of Meek's homily "A Letter to Chrstians" and kept it in his sermon file ("A Letter to Chrstians, A sermon preached in Old South Church in Boston," 21 February 1954)

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great meeting I must apologize for being late this morning but I am sure you will forgive me when you realize that I didn't get in town until about six o'clock this morning after riding all night on trains and planes with a minimum of sleep I can assure you if I had been in town earlier I would have been here on time this morning But certainly it is a real pleasure and privilege to greet you this morning and to be here

Now, since this is an overseas breakfast, naturally we are concerned about world issues—issues confronting the Christian church, issues facing our whole missionary enterprise But I'd like to discuss with you this morning some of the problems confronting our nation And before you accuse me of being provincial here, let me say to you that our nation is a part of the world, and before the problems of the world are solved, we must solve the problems of our nation, for we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality Whatever affects one directly, it affects all indirectly Missionaries tell us every day that the missionary undertaking is made more difficult in so many instances because of the gap in our national life between practice and profession And so I want to discuss some of the problems that we confront in our nation and problems that must be solved if our missionary efforts are to be meaningful

What I have to say this morning will be in the form of a letter I would like to share with you an imaginary letter which comes from the pen of the Apostle Paul, and the postmark reveals that it comes from the island of Crete³ After opening the letter, I discovered that it was written in ill-formed, sprawling Greek⁴ At the top of the letter was this inscription "Please read when the people assemble themselves together and pass on to the other churches"⁵ For many weeks now I have been laboring with the translation At times it has been difficult, but now I believe I have deciphered its true meaning And if in presenting the letter the contents sound strangely Kingian instead of Paulinian, attribute it to my lack of complete objectivity rather than Paul's lack of clarity

It is miraculous indeed that the Apostle Paul should be writing a letter to you and to me nearly nineteen hundred years after his last letter appeared in the New Testament⁶ How this is possible is something of an enigma wrapped in mystery The important thing, however, is that I can imagine the Apostle Paul writing a letter to American Christians in 1958 A D And here is the letter as it stands before me

I, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the will of God, to you who are in America, grace and peace be unto you through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ⁷

For many years I have longed to be able to come to see you I have heard so much

3 Meek also said that his letter from Paul was "postmarked on the island of Crete," although Paul did not write any of his epistles from there (Meek, "A Letter to Christians") The Book of Titus, however, was written by Paul to his disciple who was serving a young church on Crete In his 4 November 1956 version of this sermon, King preached that Paul wrote the letter in the Greek city of Ephesus (*Papers* 3 415)

4 The Pauline epistles were written in Koine Greek

5 Meek, "A Letter to Christians" "Please read on the day when the people assemble themselves together, and then pass on to the other churches"

6 Meek, "A Letter to Christians" "But by what strange miracle he should be writing to you and me nearly 1900 years after the date of his last letter in the New Testament, I cannot imagine—and I do not really care"

7 Paul began many of his letters, including Ephesians and Colossians, with this type of salutation

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of you and of what you are doing I have heard of the fascinating and astounding advances that you have made in the scientific realm I have heard of your dashing subways and flashing aeroplanes Through your scientific genius you have been able to dwarf distance and place time in chains Yes, you have been able to carve highways through the stratosphere, and so that in your world it is possible to eat breakfast in New York City and supper in Paris, France I have also heard of your skyscraping buildings with their prodigious towers steeping heavenward. I have heard of your great medical advances which have resulted in the curing of many dread plagues and diseases and, thereby, prolonging your lives and making for greater security and physical well-being All of that is marvelous You can do so many things in your day that I could not do in the Greco-Roman world of my day In your age you can travel distances in one day that it took me three months to travel That is wonderful You have made tremendous strides in the area of scientific and technological development.

But America, as I look at you from afar, I wonder whether your moral and spiritual progress has been commensurate with your scientific progress Your poet Thoreau used to talk about improved means to an unimproved end.⁸ How often this is true You have allowed the material means by which you live to outdistance the spiritual ends for which you live You have allowed your mentality to outrun your morality You have allowed your civilization to outdistance your culture, and through your scientific genius you have made of the world a neighborhood But through your moral and spiritual genius, you have failed to make of it a brotherhood And so, America, I would urge you to bring your moral advances in line with your scientific advances

I am impelled to write you concerning the responsibilities laid upon you to live as Christians in the midst of an unchristian world This is what I had to do This is what every Christian has to do⁹ But I understand that there are many Christians in America who give their ultimate allegiance to man-made systems and customs They are afraid to be different Their great concern is to be accepted socially They live by some such principle as this "Everybody is doing it, so it must be all right" Morality is merely group consensus In your modern sociological lingo, the mores are accepted as the right ways. You have unconsciously come to believe that right is discovered by taking a sort of Gallup Poll of the majority opinion, and how many are giving their ultimate allegiance to this way¹⁰

But American Christians, I must say to you, as I said to the Roman Christians years ago, "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind"¹¹ Or as I said to the Philippian Christians, "Ye are a colony of heaven"¹² This means that although you live in the colony of time your ultimate

8 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), p. 57

9 Meek, "A Letter to Christians" "I am impelled to write to you about the demands that are laid upon you to live as Christians in the midst of the sub-Christian world of your day That is what I had to do—live in an unChristian world That is what we all have to do"

10 King wrote at the end of his copy of "A Letter to Christians" "They tell me that there are some among you particularly one by the name of McCarthy, who has caused Christian to be afraid to speak out against social evils They tell me that even some of the preachers have lost the prophetic note"

11 Cf. Romans 12:2

12 Cf. Philippians 3:20 (MOFFATT)

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allegiance is to the empire of eternity You have a dual citizenry You live both in time and eternity, both in heaven and earth ¹³ Therefore, your ultimate allegiance is not to the government, not to the state, not to the nation, not to any man-made institution The Christian owes his ultimate allegiance to God, and if any earthly institution conflicts with God's will, it is your Christian duty to take a stand against it You must never allow the transitory, evanescent demands of man-made institutions to take precedence over the eternal demands of the Almighty God

I understand that you have an economic system in America known as capitalism, and through this economic system you have been able to do wonders You have become the richest nation in the world, and you have built up the greatest system of production that history has ever known All of this is marvelous But Americans, there is the danger that you will misuse your capitalism I still contend that money can be the root of all evil ¹⁴ It can cause one to live a life of gross materialism, and I'm afraid that many among you are more concerned about making a living than making a life ¹⁵ You are prone to judge the success of your professions by the index of your salary and the size of the wheel base on your automobile rather than the quality of your service to humanity

The misuse of capitalism can also lead to tragic exploitation This has so often happened in your nation They tell me that one-tenth of one percent of the population controls more than forty percent of the wealth Oh, America, how often have you taken necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes? If you are to be truly a Christian nation, you must solve this problem Now, you cannot solve the problem by turning to communism, for communism is based on an ethical relativism and a metaphysical materialism that no Christian can accept But you can work within the framework of democracy to bring about a better distribution of wealth You can use your powerful economic resources to wipe poverty from the face of the earth God never intended for a group of people to live in superfluous, inordinate wealth while others live in abject, deadening poverty God intends for all of His children to have the basic necessities of life, and He has left in this universe enough and to spare for that purpose So I call upon you to bridge the gulf between abject poverty and superfluous wealth

I would that I could be with you in person so that I could say to you face to face what I am forced to say to you in writing Oh, how I long to share your fellowship ¹⁶

Let me rush on to say something about the church America, I must remind you,

¹³ Meek, "A Letter to Christians" "Your citizenship is two-fold—on earth and in heaven, in time and in eternity, of the kingdoms of men and of the kingdom of God" On that page of his copy of Meek's sermon, King wrote, "Remember that your citizenship is twofold—It is true that you live in the colony of time But you must get your orders from the empire of eternity"

¹⁴ Cf. 1 Timothy 6:10

¹⁵ On the last two pages of his copy of "A Letter to Christians," King noted, "I understand that you have a economic system called capitalism and it has wrought many good fruits, such as giving you the greatest production system in the world It has also brought many evils Since I am not an economist I cannot criticism it from an economic point of view but only from an economic one (1) exploitation (2) a gross materialism"

¹⁶ Meek, "A Letter to Christians" "I would to God that I could be with you in person, so that I could say to your face—and more too—what I am writing"

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as I have said to so many others, that the church is the body of Christ, and so when the church is true to its nature, it knows neither division nor disunity. But I am disturbed about what you are doing to the body of Christ. They tell me that in America you have within Protestantism more than 256 denominations. The tragedy is not so much that you have such a multiplicity of denominations but that most of them are warring against each other with a claim to absolute truth.¹⁷ I am not calling for uniformity, America, I am calling for unity. This narrow sectarianism is destroying the unity of the body of Christ. You must come to see that God is not a Baptist, God is not a Methodist, God is not a Presbyterian, God is not an Episcopalian. God is bigger than all of our denominations. You must come to see that, America.

But I must not stop with a criticism of Protestantism. I am disturbed about Roman Catholicism. This church stands before the world with its pomp and power, insisting that it possesses the only truth. It incorporates an arrogance that becomes a dangerous spiritual arrogance. It stands with its noble pope who somehow rises to the miraculous heights of infallibility when he speaks *ex cathedra*.¹⁸ But I am disturbed about a person or an institution that claims infallibility in this world. I am disturbed about any church that refuses to cooperate with other churches under the pretense that it is the only true church. I must emphasize the fact that God is not a Roman Catholic and that the boundless sweep of his revelation cannot be limited to the Vatican. Roman Catholicism must do a great deal to mend its ways.¹⁹ I understand that you have in your nation what is known as the National Council of Churches. And all over the world now there is a World Council of Churches, and I would urge you to continue to cooperate with all of these bodies. More than anything else, they continually remind us that we are all one in Christ Jesus. And that at bottom, although we differ in certain credal systems and certain doctrinal forms, there is a unity that makes us all one.

There is another thing that disturbs me to no end about the American church—you have a white church, and you have a Negro church.²⁰ You have allowed segregation to creep into the doors of the church. How can such a division exist in the true body of Christ? You must face the tragic fact that when you stand at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning to sing "In Christ There Is No East or West," you stand in the most segregated hour of Christian America.²¹ They tell me that there is more integration in the entertaining world, in sports arenas, in other secular agencies,

17 A *Chicago Daily Tribune* article reported that King praised the creation of the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. "as a move away from the 'multiplicity of denominations' within American Protestantism. The tragedy of having so many of them, he said, is that 'most of them are warring against each other with a claim to absolute truth.'" ("Presbyterian White Groups O.K. Negroes," 4 June 1958)

18 *Ex cathedra*, or "from the chair," signifies the pronouncement of church doctrine, particularly that coming from the pope of the Roman Catholic Church.

19 King mitigated his harsh criticism of divisive sectarianism, particularly of Catholicism, in the published version of this sermon (King, *Strength to Love*, pp. 129–130).

20 On the last page of his copy of Meek's sermon, King wrote, "The division in the churches appalls me (i.e. Negro and White)."

21 King refers to John Oxenham's hymn "In Christ There Is No East Or West" (1908). In the November 1956 version of this sermon at Dexter, King cited the hymns "All Hail the Power of Jesus Name" and "Dear Lord and Father of All Mankind" (*Papers* 3:417).

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than there is in the Christian church. How appalling that is. I understand that there are Christians among you who try to justify segregation on the basis of the Bible. They argue that the Negro is inferior by nature because of Noah's curse upon the children of Ham.²² Oh, my friends, this is blaspheming. This is against everything that the Christian religion stands for. I must say to you, as I have said to so many Christians before, that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.²³ Moreover, I must reiterate the words that I uttered on Mars' Hill: "God that made the world and all things therein hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth."²⁴

And so Americans, I am impelled to urge you to get rid of every aspect of segregation. The broad universalism standing at the center of the gospel makes both the theory and practice of segregation morally unjustifiable. Segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we all have in Christ. It substitutes an I-It relationship [recording interrupted] relationship.²⁵ The segregator relegates the segregated to the status of a thing rather than elevate him to the status of a person. The underlying philosophy of Christianity is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of segregation, and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them lie down together. I praise your Supreme Court for rendering a great decision just a few years ago.²⁶ And I am happy to know that so many persons of goodwill have accepted the decision as a great moral victory. And I understand that there are some brothers among you who have risen up in open defiance. And I hear that their legislative halls ring loud with such words as "nullification" and "interposition." They have lost the true meaning of democracy and Christianity. So I would urge each of you to plead patiently with your brothers and tell them that this isn't the way. With understanding goodwill, you are obligated to seek to change their attitudes. Let them know that in standing against integration they are not only standing against the noble precepts of your democracy but also against the eternal edicts of God Himself. Yes America, there is still the need for an Amos to cry out to the nation, "Let judgment roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."²⁷

Now, I know there are those among you who are talking about gradualism and moderation. They are saying to you that you must slow up in the move for freedom and justice. I would say to you, America, if moderation means moving on towards the goal of justice and freedom, with wise restraint and calm reasonableness, then moderation is a great virtue that all men of goodwill must seek to achieve in this tense period of transition. But if moderation means slowing up in the move for justice and capitulating to the whims and caprices of the guardians of a deadening status quo, then moderation is a tragic vice which all men of goodwill must condemn.

22 Genesis 9:24-25

23 Galatians 3:28

24 Acts 17:24, 26

25 In his 4 November 1956 version of this sermon at Dexter, King said at this point in the sermon, "It substitutes an 'I-it' relationship for the 'I-thou' relationship" (*Papers* 3:418).

26 King probably refers to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

27 Amos 5:24

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You must say to your brothers all over America that you have a moral obligation to press on, and because of your love for America and your love for democracy, you must press on. You must realize that out of the two billion five hundred million people in this world, about one billion six hundred million of them are colored, living on two continents, mainly Asia and Africa—six hundred million in China, four hundred million in India and Pakistan, two hundred million in Africa, a hundred million in Indonesia, more than eighty-six million in Japan. For years, these people have been the victims of colonialism and imperialism, and now they are breaking loose. They are breaking loose from all of this, and they are saying in no uncertain terms that racism and colonialism must go. So if your nation is to be a first-class nation, she can no longer have second-class citizens.

May I say just a word to those of you who are struggling against this evil in America. Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him. Always avoid using violence in your struggle, for if you succumb to the temptation of using violence unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos. Remember, America, that there is still a voice crying out through the vista of time, saying to every potential Peter, "Put up your sword."²⁸ And history is replete with the bleached bones of nations. History is cluttered with the wreckage of communities that fail to follow this command. And so violence is not the way.

In your struggle for justice [*recording interrupted*] or even to pay him back for injustice that he has heaped upon you²⁹ Let him know that you are merely seeking justice for him as well as yourself. Let him know that the festering sore of segregation debilitates a white man as well as a Negro. With this attitude, you will be able to keep your struggle on high Christian standards.

Many persons will recognize the urgency of seeking to eradicate the evil of segregation. There will be many Negroes who will devote their lives to the cause of freedom. There will be many white persons of goodwill and strong moral sensitivity who will dare to take a stand for justice. Honesty impels me to admit that such a stand requires willingness to suffer and sacrifice, so don't despair if you are condemned and persecuted for righteousness' sake.³⁰ Whenever you take a stand for truth and justice, you are liable to scorn. Often you will be called an impractical idealist or a dangerous radical. Sometimes it might mean going to jail. If such is the case, you must honorably grace the jail with your presence. It might even mean physical death for some. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing could be more Christian.

²⁸ John 18:11

²⁹ In his 4 November 1956 version of this sermon at Dexter, King elaborated, "In your struggle for justice, let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him, or even pay him back for injustices that he has heaped upon you" (*Papers* 3:418).

³⁰ Cf. Matthew 5:10

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Don't worry about persecution, America You are going to have that if you stand up for a great principle I can say this with some authority because my life was a continual round of persecutions After my conversion, I was rejected by the disciples at Jerusalem Later, I was tried for heresy at Jerusalem I was jailed at Philippi, beaten at Thessalonica, mobbed at Ephesus, and depressed at Athens ³¹ But yet I am still going I came away from each of these experiences more persuaded than ever before that neither life nor death, angels nor principalities, things present nor things to come shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord ³² I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world This is the end of life, America The end of life is not to be happy The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and to avoid pain The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may

I must bring my writing to a close, now Timothy is awaiting me to deliver this letter, and I must take leave for another church ³³ But just before leaving, I must say to you, as I said to the church at Corinth, that I still believe that love is the most durable power in all the world ³⁴ Over the centuries men have sought to discover the highest good This has been the chief quest of ethical philosophy This was one of the big questions of Greek philosophy The Epicureans and the Stoics sought to answer it Plato and Aristotle sought to answer it What is the *summum bonum* of life? ³⁵ I think I have an answer, America I think I have discovered the highest good It is love. This principle stands at the center of the cosmos As John says, "God is love" ³⁶ And so he who loves is a participant in the being of God He who hates does not know God ³⁷

So American Christians, you may master the intricacies of the English language You may possess all of the eloquence of articulate speech But even if you speak with the tongues of men and angels and have not love, you are become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

You may have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries ³⁸ You may be able to break into the storehouse of nature and bring out many insights that men never dreamed were there You may ascend to the heights of academic achievement so that you will have all knowledge You may boast of your great institutions of learning and the boundless extent of your degrees But all of this amounts to absolutely nothing devoid of love

Yes, America, you may give your goods to feed the poor You may give great gifts

³¹ Cf 2 Corinthians 11:22-30 In his copy of Meek's sermon, King wrote on the last page, "Those of you who are living the Christian life may sometimes be persecuted, but don't worry, for God will give you power to withstand it I myself have had a deal of trouble living the life for Christ I was tried for heresy at Jerusalem, etc "

³² Cf Romans 8:39

³³ Meek, "A Letter to Christians" "(Timothy tells me that I must finish my writing because the winged machine that is to carry this letter to you will be here shortly)"

³⁴ Cf 1 Corinthians 13:13 (MOFFATT, RSV)

³⁵ *Summum bonum* is Latin for "the greatest good "

³⁶ 1 John 4:8, 16

³⁷ Cf 1 John 4:7-8

³⁸ Cf 1 Corinthians 13:1-2

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to charity You may tower high in philanthropy, but if you have not love, it means nothing You may even give your body to be burned and die the death of a martyr. And your spilled blood may be a symbol of honor for generations yet unborn, and thousands may praise you as history's supreme hero But even so if you have not love, your blood was spilled in vain You must come to see that it is possible for a man to be self-centered in his self-denial and self-righteous in his self-sacrifice He may be generous in order to feed his ego and pious in order to feed his pride Man has a tragic capacity to relegate a heightening virtue to a tragic vice Without love, benevolence becomes egotism and martyrdom becomes spiritual pride

So the greatest of all virtues is love³⁹ This is the thing that kept the early church moving This is the thing that kept us moving amid the days of persecution around the Greco-Roman world Men and women would look at us and cry out, "What is it that makes you so happy? Is it in your ecclesiastical machinery?" And we could answer, "No " "Is it in your dogmas? Is it in your creeds?" And we could answer, "No " "What is it then?" We could cry out, "We are happy because we have passed from death unto life " "Why?" "Because we love, that is it " This is the thing that must keep the church moving, and America, let me say to you that this is the meaning of the cross That event on Calvary is more than a meaningless drama that took place on the stage of history It is a telescope through which we look out into the long vista of eternity and see the love of God breaking forth into time It is an eternal reminder to a power-drunk generation that love is a most durable power in the world and that is, at bottom, the heartbeat of the moral cosmos Only through achieving this love can you expect to matriculate into the university of eternal life

I must say good-bye now I hope this letter will find you strong in the faith⁴⁰ It may be that I will not get to see you in America, but I will meet you in God's eternity

And now unto Him who is able to keep us from falling⁴¹ And now unto Him who is able to lift us from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope. And now unto Him who is able to solve the race problem if we will cooperate with Him And now unto Him who is able to transform this cosmic energy into constructive force Now unto Him who is able to transform this midnight of injustice into a glowing day-break of freedom and justice To Him be power and authority, majesty and dominion, now, henceforth, and forever more⁴²

This is the letter, and now comes the living of it.⁴³ [*sustained applause*]

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39 Cf 1 Corinthians 13 13 (MOFFATT, RSV)

40 Meek, "A Letter to Chrstians" "I trust that the letter finds you well and strong in the faith I must take my leave now, and in God's eternity we shall all meet " At the bottom of this page of his copy of Meek's sermon, King wrote, "Love is still the principle thing You may have towering skyscrapers, ~~and~~ but without love it is nothing You may have all knowledge, all philosophical profundity, but without love "

41 Jude 1 24

42 Cf Jude 1 25

43 Meek, "A Letter to Chrstians" "Now comes the living of it "