empress first For years she stood as an island no larger than the State of Georgia, ruling almost a third of the world. She boasted that "the sun never sets on her empire." But today the British empire with all of her massive power is diminishing to such a state that we can almost say, "the sun never rises on her empire." America is placing economic power first. We are boasting that we are the richest nation in the world and that we possess the power of the atom bomb. But if we do not place something deeper than this first we too will be plunged across the abyss of destruction.

The voice of Christ is sounding yet. Ah, Christ, you have been saying it a long time. God help us as individuals and as a world to hear it now before it is too late. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these other things shall be added unto you."

Preached 8–2–53
[Preached at Dexter, Third Sunday Sept 19, 1954]

TAD CSKC Sermon file, folder 112, "First Things First."

"Communism’s Challenge to Christianity"

I hope that all of you will listen to me very attentively this afternoon as I humbly attempt to speak to you about one of the most important issues of our day. There are at least two reasons why I as a Christian Minister feel obligated to talk to you about Communism.

The first has to do with the widespread influence of Communism. It is believed in by more than 200,000,000 people covering one fifth of the earth’s surface. Multitudes have embraced it as the most coherent philosophy and the greatest single emotional drive they know.

A second reason why the Christian minister should speak about it is that

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1 King filed this typed version and a handwritten outline of this sermon in the same file folder (King, "Communism’s Challenge to Christianity," Sermon outline, 9 August 1953). He also preached a sermon with this title at Ebenezer on 10 August 1952 ("Communism’s Challenge to Christianity," King Jr’s Topic, Ebenezer, Atlanta Daily World, 9 August 1952). King later developed this theme in "Can a Christian Be a Communist?" Sermon Delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church (30 September 1962, pp. 445–454 in this volume, and "How Should a Christian View Communism?" in Strength to Love, pp. 93–100).
Communism is the only serious rival to Christianity. Other historic world religions such as Judaism, Mohammedanism, Buddhism, Hinduism, may be listed as possible alternatives to Christianity, but for Christianity's greatest rival we must look elsewhere. Certainly no one in touch with the realities of the contemporary situation can deny that in the crisis confronting civilization Christianity's most formidable competitor and only serious rival is communism.

Let us begin by stating that communism and Christianity are at the bottom incompatible. One cannot be a true Christian and a true Communist simultaneously. How then is Communism irreconcilable with Christianity?

In the first place it leaves out God and Christ. It is avowedly secularistic and materialistic. It regards religion psychologically as mere wishful thinking, intellectually as the product of fear and ignorance, and historically as serving the ends of exploiters. Because of public opinion authorities have had to modify some of their anti-religious doctrines, but the official policy of the communistic party is still atheistic.

In the second place the methods of communism are diametrically opposed to Christianity. Since for the Communist there is no Divine government, no absolute moral order, there are no fixed, immutable principles. Force, violence, murder, and lying are all justifiable means to the millennial end. Said Lenin, "we must be ready to employ trickery, deceit, and lawbreaking, withholding and concealing truth." That the followers of Lenin have been willing to act upon his instructions is a matter of history.

In the third place, the end of communism is the state. I shall qualify this by saying that the state in Communist theory is a temporary reality which is to be eliminated when the classless society emerges. But it is true that the state is the end while it lasts. Man becomes only a means to that end. And if any man's so-called rights or liberties stand in the way of that end, they are simply swept aside. His liberties of press or pulpit expression, his freedom to vote, his freedom to listen to what news he likes or to choose his books and even his friendships are all restricted. Man has to be a servant, dutiful and submissive, of the State, and the state is omnipotent and supreme.

Now there can be no doubt that all of this is the negation not only of the

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2 McCracken, "What Should Be the Christian Attitude to Communism," in Questions People Ask, p. 164. "No one in touch with the realities of the contemporary situation will deny that in the crisis confronting civilization Christianity's most formidable competitor and only serious rival is Communism."

3 Morehouse professor and Ebenezer member Melvin Watson attended the 1952 service where King first preached this sermon and commented in a 14 August letter to King. "In discussing Communist theory in the early part of the sermon it was not clear to me whether you understood Communist materialism. The Communist theorists were definitely not materialists after the fashion of the Greek atomists. Marx's position was that the culture, thoughts, in fact, the whole life of man is conditioned (seems to use the word, determine, at times by the means of production) by his relationship to the instruments necessary to the making of a living. This variety of materialism is very difficult to refute and is a very disturbing phenomenon. Whether a man stands in relation to the means of production as an owner or a mere user does make a difference in the way he thinks, acts, etc. It is exceedingly difficult to deny this and make it stick!" (Papers 2.156-157)

4 McCracken, Questions People Ask, p. 168. "Because it is avowedly secularistic and materialistic.

5 McCracken, Questions People Ask, pp. 168-169. "We must be ready," wrote Lenin, 'to employ trickery, deceit, lawbreaking, withholding and concealing truth.'
Christian belief in God and the moral order that he has established, but also of the Christian estimate of man. I am cognizant of the fact that the record of the Christian Church has been smeared in the past by infamous persecutions and the irremovable strain of the inquisition, but even so Christianity at its best has never let go the ideal that man is an end because he is a child of God, and that the end of all life is the glory of God. The Christian ethic would affirm that destructive means can never justify constructive ends, because in the final analysis the end is pre-existent in the mean.

So let us not fool ourselves these two systems of thought are too contradictory to be reconciled. They represent diametrically opposed ways of looking at the world and transforming the world. We must try to understand Communism, but never can we accept it and be true Christians.

Yet we must realize that there is something in Communism which challenges us all. It was the late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple that referred to Communism as a Christian heresy. By this he meant that Communism had laid hold on certain truths which are essential part of the Christian view of things, but that it had bound up with them concepts and practices which no Christian can ever accept or profess. In other words, although Communism can never be accepted by a Christian, it emphasizes many essential truths that must forever challenge us as Christians. Indeed, it may be that Communism is a necessary corrective for a Christianity that has been all to passive and a democracy that has been all to inert.

It should challenge us first to be more concerned about social justice. However much is wrong with Communism we must admit that it arose as a protest against the hardships of the underprivileged. The Communist Manifesta which was published in 1847 by Marx and Engels emphasizes throughout how the middle class has exploited the lower class. Communism emphasizes a classless society. Along with this goes a strong attempt to eliminate racial prejudice. Communism seeks to transcend the superficialities of race and color, and you are able to join the Communist party whatever the color of your skin or the quality of the blood in your veins. [Marx was a Jew & later Christian]

With this passionate concern for social justice Christians are bound to be in

6 McCracken, Questions People Ask, pp 165-166. William Temple, the late Archbishop of Canterbury, was a distinguished philosopher and a man of affairs. He was a great Christian as well as a great churchman. From all over Christendom men looked to him for light and leading. He once described Communism as a 'Christian heresy.' What did he mean by that? He meant that Communism had laid hold on certain truths which are essential part of the Christian scheme of things and which every Christian should acknowledge and profess, but that it had bound up with them concepts and practices which no Christian can ever acknowledge or profess.

7 Watson remarked, 'Stalin would certainly not make the question of race a sub-point as you did on Sunday. With him it is a major point.' He continued, 'I think there can be no doubt about it that the appeal of communism to the Eastern nations today can be traceable to a large degree to the Soviet attitude toward race. This is a strategic policy with Russia' (Watson to King, 14 August 1952, in Papers 2 157).

8 McCracken, Questions People Ask, p 166. With a passionate concern for social justice Christians are bound to be in the completest accord. It is implicit in the Christian doctrines of the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of man, the infinite worth of the human soul and explicit in passage after passage of the Bible.
accord. Such concern is implicit in the Christian doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. The Christian ought always to begin with a bias in favor of a movement which protests against unfair treatment of the poor, for surely Christianity is itself such a protest. The Communist Manifesto might express a concern for the poor and oppressed, but it expresses no greater concern than the Manifesta of Jesus with this as its opening sentence: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; Je hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." And so a passionate concern for social justice must be a concern of the Christian religion.

We must admit that we as Christians have often lagged behind at this point. Slavery could not have existed in America for more than two hundred and fifty years if the Church had not sanctioned it. Segregation and discrimination could not exist in America today without the sanction of the Church. I am ashamed and appalled at the fact that Eleven O'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in Christian America. How tardy we have been! The Church has to often been an institution serving to crystallize the patterns of the status quo. Who can blame Karl Marx for calling such a religion an opium? When religion becomes involved in a future good "over yonder" that it forgets the present evils "over here" it is a dry as dust religion and needs to be condemned. We must be concerned about the gulf between [superfluous wealth and abject poverty]. Marx revealed the danger of the profit motive as the sole [basis] [remainder missing]

Communism also challenges us to invite all Christian forces for action. Too often have we been preoccupied with debates about orders and sacraments and ritual and denominationalism while civilization is engaged in a race with catastrophe. If we are to win the world to Christ we must rise above our differences realizing that we have unity of purpose and that God is not a denominational God.

Lastly we are challenged to dedicate and devote our lives to the cause of Christ as the Communist do to Communism. We cannot accept their creed, but we must admire their zeal, and their readiness to sacrifice themselves to the very uttermost and even to lay down their lives for a cause that they believe is going to make the world a better place. I have seen communists in universities passionately attempting...
to win their associates to communism. How many Christian students in our universities today have ever tried to win other students to Christ? How many of you on your jobs have ever attempted to win others to Christ? Would today that the Christian fire were burning with the same intensity in the hearts of Christians as the Communist fire is burning in the hearts of Communists. We must match the evangelistic passion of the Communists. We must unreservedly commit ourselves to the cause of Christ.

It seems that I can hear a voice crying through the vista of time: "ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." I can hear the same voice saying, "go out into the highways and hedges and compel men to come." I can hear the same voice saying, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Who this afternoon will answer saying "Here am I O Lord, and I unreservedly commit myself to thy cause."

Preached Aug 9, 1953

TAD CSKC Sermon file, folder 10, "Communism's Challenge to Christianity"

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"The Dimensions of a Complete Life,”

Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[24 January 1954]

[Montgomery, Ala.]

King delivered a version of this sermon at Dexter in Montgomery, Alabama, as the congregation considered him as a candidate to be their new pastor. In a letter sent prior to King's appearance, Dexter deacon and choir director Joseph T. Brooks advised

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1 King's sermon title for the Dexter service was "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life" (Mary K. Frazier, "News of Colored People," Montgomery Examinier, 28 January 1954). He filed this document with another handwritten draft of this sermon that contained a discussion of only two of the three dimensions referred to in the sermon ("The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," 24 January 1954). King wrote on the folder "Preached at Dexter January 1954." This was the first sermon that Coretta Scott heard King deliver, indicating it was developed by the early part of 1952 (Coretta Scott King, My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr [New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969], p. 59). He preached a version of the sermon on 6 September 1953 at Ebenezer Baptist Church and in 1960 during a fund-raising tour of California for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) ("King Jr to End Series of Summer Sermons, Ebenezer," Atlanta Daily World, 5 September 1953, King, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," Sermon Delivered at Friendship Baptist Church, 28 February 1960, pp. 395–405 in this volume). For other versions of this sermon, see King, The Measure of a Man.