

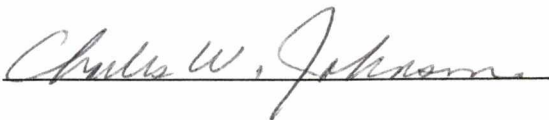
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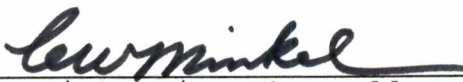
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Associate Vice Chancellor and
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**Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight
Religious Leaders, the Media, and the *Letter From Birmingham Jail***

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Samuel Jonathan Bass III
December 1996

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S. Jonathan Bass III, October 1996

ABSTRACT

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s overflowed with symbols and heroes of the African-American quest for racial justice. One of the most enduring images was Martin Luther King Jr. imprisoned in the Birmingham Jail. While in an isolated prison cell, King began composing the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

Despite the document's personal appearance as a correspondence addressed to eight religious leaders, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference used the *Letter* (and the clergy) for impersonal means. Released to the public as an open letter, the twenty-page, type-written manuscript was, simply stated, a public relations document--clearly composed for media consumption. Arrested on Good Friday, April 12, 1963, King had defied a court injunction and led a protest march in the streets of Birmingham. In jail, King began composing the *Letter* from his cell. This image of a lone apostolic figure, writing a prison epistle, became an important symbol for the movement. This story also became one of the selling points for SCLC officials seeking to use the document for publicity and fund raising. King, however, only wrote part of the *Letter* while in prison. King and others continued to compose and edit long after the April 16 date on the manuscript. This suggests that the *Letter from Birmingham*

Jail was never intended as a personal correspondence, but a document for the mass media.

The white clergy, to whom it was addressed, never received a personalized, delivered, or signed copy of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* from King. They first read the *Letter* when it appeared in miscellaneous newspapers, magazines, and journals across the country in May, June, and August 1963. In the nearly thirty-five years since the Birmingham movement, these religious leaders have been consistently portrayed as bigots and defenders of the status quo. Few ever paused to consider the reaction of the *Letter's* ostensible audience.

This dissertation advances two central arguments: 1) The *Letter from Birmingham Jail* furthered the SCLC's central goal of obtaining extensive media coverage and served as a public relations document; 2) Conversely, the *Letter* also had an intensely personal impact upon each of the eight white clergy.

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INTRODUCTION

The Martin Luther King-led, SCLC-wing of the civil rights movement proved particularly successful in attracting media attention. Through a highly organized public relations campaign in Birmingham, Alabama during the spring of 1963, the nation witnessed the injustices of southern segregation. King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* emerged as a key component in this crusade for justice and publicity.

On Good Friday, April 12, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. defied a court injunction and led a protest march in the streets of Birmingham. Arrested and jailed, King began composing the *Letter* from his cell. This image of a lone apostolic figure, writing a prison epistle, became an important symbol for the movement. This story also became one of the selling points for SCLC officials seeking to use the document for publicity and fund raising. King, however, only wrote part of the *Letter* while in prison. Evidence reveals that King and others continued to compose and edit long after the April 16 date on the manuscript. This suggests that the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* was never intended as a personal correspondence, but a document for the mass media.

King used the *Letter* as a literary pulpit to explain and justify the use of nonviolent direct action in the quest for racial equality in the South. Widely published in various

media outlets throughout the country, the document helped propel King to earthly glory. King's composition soon emerged as the most important written document of the civil rights protest era and a widely read modern literary classic. The document had such a far-reaching impact that several black leaders in the 1970s and 1980s launched a movement to include the *Letter* as the sixty-seventh book of the Protestant Bible.

Although presented to a broad national audience through the mass media, King and his associates addressed the document specifically to eight of Birmingham's most prominent white religious leaders: Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter, Bishop Joseph A. Durick, Rabbi Milton L. Grafman, Bishop Paul Hardin, Bishop Nolan B. Harmon Jr., Bishop George M. Murray, Reverend Edward V. Ramage, and Reverend J. Earl Stallings. These clergy had joined a chorus of critics from throughout the country and issued their own public statement calling the civil rights demonstrations "unwise and untimely" and urging Birmingham's black community to withdraw support. King and the SCLC simply used these ministers as a spring-board for obtaining further media coverage of the Birmingham campaign. Although personally addressed, none of these white religious leaders ever received a personalized, signed, or delivered copy of King's *Letter*.

Despite these impersonal uses, the story of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, retained a strong personal component. The eight white ministers were unwillingly thrust into the

national spotlight and had their racial and religious beliefs maligned by King and the media. Each had an intensely personal response to King and his prison epistle, but few journalists or scholars ever paused to consider the clergy's viewpoint. Several of the clergy had feelings of bitterness, others skepticism, while others were simply confused and perplexed by the document and King's arguments. They all felt used by King and the media, but chose to remain publicly silent about the *Letter*.

These white clergy supported the concepts of racial justice and black equality, but they disagreed with Martin Luther King as to the best methods to achieve these goals. For King and the SCLC, crisis-packed demonstrations provided the empowerment and the publicity the movement needed for fund raising and negotiations. Negotiations with white moderates produced none of essentials needed for publicity. In 1963, the prospect of rapid change forced by "outside" demonstrators greatly distressed white racial moderates like the eight Birmingham ministers. They advocated a slow, gradual change in the racial status quo, while King demanded an immediate transformation.

While white moderates certainly shared part of the blame for the South's poor race relations, they remained among the most misunderstood and verbally abused members of southern society. Author and activist James McBride Dabbs once wrote that anyone in the South who expressed even the slightest

concern with race relations, immediately became a member of the "aristocracy of the damn fools." For their part, these eight white ministers felt like fools caught in the middle between belligerent segregationists and civil rights activists. Segregationists blasted white moderates for being integrationists, race traitors, and "nigger lovers." In turn, the movement, the media, and specifically the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* dismissed moderates as defenders of the segregated South. The "ultimate tragedy" of the Birmingham civil rights campaign, wrote Martin Luther King Jr., in 1963, was not the brutality of the belligerent segregationists, but the silence of the white moderates.¹

When a group of white moderates did speak out in Birmingham, King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff used them as verbal sparring partners in a campaign for publicity and fund raising. The SCLC needed the media and money in the quest to end segregation in the South. Therefore, obtaining extensive press coverage was clearly a primary goal in the civil rights campaign in Birmingham. The events surrounding the production and publication of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* further illustrate the importance of the role of the media in the civil rights movement.

¹ Dabbs quote in George R. Osborne, "Boycott in Birmingham," *Nation* (May 5, 1962): p. 399; Martin Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, Harper & Row, 1964), p. 43.

Martin Luther King Jr. displayed a remarkable media savvy. There were many sides to King: he was a thoroughly committed Christian, a remarkable orator, and a theologian; he had an amazing ability to move poor blacks, as well as elitist, upper class whites. These aspects of King's intellect and life's work often obscured his ability to skillfully use the mass media—a talent that was often overlooked by admirers and subsequently by scholars. King's advisors and staff, masterful public relations specialists in their own right, provided key assistance in developing highly effective publicity campaigns to obtain extensive media coverage. This gives Americans yet another reason to admire the remarkable work of civil rights activists.

During April and May 1963, civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham focused international attention on race relations in the United States. Television cameras and newspaper photographs revealed the injustice and brutality of southern segregation. It was most certainly not a chance occurrence. Although the movement in Birmingham often appeared fluid and unplanned, the campaign organizers remained clearly and sharply focused on the goal of obtaining media coverage. King and the SCLC staff were willing to try several different tactics (sit-ins, voter registration, etc.) to attract the national news media. In Birmingham and other centers of civil rights activities, King and the SCLC provided two important elements: a symbolic Moses who could unify the black

community, and a well organized public relations and fund-raising machine to garner national attention and attract sympathetic supporters.

Meanwhile, the white ministers believed such activities upset the apple cart of slow and peaceful change in the region. They urged African-Americans to remain patient and wait for a more convenient season for racial equality. The dilemma demanded time, they supposed; time for more education, time for more debate, time for better laws, time to establish racial harmony, and most of all, a time when peace and order would be maintained. Before a national audience, King used the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* to reject these ideas and present his case for immediate integration.

CHAPTER I

EYES ON THE PRESS: MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., SYMBOLISM, AND THE MEDIA

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s relied on powerful symbolism, moving rhetoric, and the national media to help break down racial barriers in the United States. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were particularly successful in using Biblical rhetoric and symbols via the national media to sway the public to embrace the goals of the movement. King and the nonviolent demonstrations provided noble images for the press and the American public: drama, tragedy, and stirring rhetoric. The nonviolent demonstrations emerged as morality plays. Like lambs marching to the slaughter, the demonstrators confronted the determined and sometimes violent defenders of southern segregation.¹

These confrontations were often actually "pseudo-events"—carefully planned and staged demonstrations for media consumption.² Arguably, the primary, short-term goal of the SCLC-wing of the civil rights movement was obtaining extensive

¹ David Halberstam, The Fifties (New York: Villard Books, 1993), pp. 691-92.

² Daniel Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (New York: Atheneum, 1961), pp. 10-12. Boorstin provided four characteristics of a pseudo-event: 1) not spontaneous, but carefully "planned, planted, or incited;" 2) planted for the media; 3) an ambiguous relation to reality; 4) and intended for a "self-fulfilling prophecy."

media coverage to reveal the injustices of segregation, to sway public opinion, to raise much-needed funding for the cash-starved movement, and to promote King's image. Undoubtedly the overarching goal remained the destruction of segregation; however, civil rights advocates readily acknowledged media manipulation was the primary means to that end. Many of the movement leaders had their eyes on the press as much as on the prize of freedom. As activist Andrew Young emphasized, the SCLC consciously used the media to achieve victory and the whole movement was about "getting publicity."³

The *Letter from Birmingham Jail* must be considered within this media context. To understand fully the purpose of the *Letter*, the manuscript must be seen as the crowning document in one of the most skillful publicity campaigns in modern American history. Movement activist John Porter believed the essay had clearly been written with an "eye for media consumption." Widely reproduced in the nation's print media outlets, the *Letter* was clearly and convincingly used by King and his associates in the SCLC for public relations and fund raising.⁴

Using the press to bring the movement before the public eye worked to near perfection in the Birmingham campaign of 1963. King's top strategist, Wyatt T. Walker, believed the

³ David Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1986), p. 264.

⁴ Alabama Baptist, March 18, 1993.

news media had never been more skillfully manipulated than as during the movement in Birmingham. Most civil rights leaders and activists clearly recognized the importance and the power of the press to the quest for racial justice. Reverend Porter believed the movement's focus on obtaining national media attention was "one of the keys" to success. Birmingham activist Fred Shuttlesworth considered the press powerful enough to "make or break" the movement. Without the media, he concluded, the civil rights movement "would not have succeeded as it did."⁵

During the Birmingham campaign, King was acutely aware of the role of the press in the success of the movement. While in the Birmingham Jail during the demonstrations, one of his first questions to the outside world was whether or not the movement was "being carried well" by the press. Following his release from jail and as media coverage dwindled, King looked to rekindle press interest. "You know, we've got to get something going," King told his aides. "The press is leaving, we've got to get going." This practical side to King shocked Reverend Porter. "I want God with us," he told King, "not the press." Porter yearned for a civil rights victory via righteousness and God's might, not through the power of the

⁵ Walker quote in Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 264; Porter quote in Alabama Baptist, March 18, 1993; Shuttlesworth quote in Enrique DuBois Rigsby, "A Rhetorical Clash With the Established Order: An Analysis of Protest Strategies and Perceptions of Media Responses, Birmingham, 1963," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oregon, 1990), p. 173.

press. Regardless, he soon realized that in the twentieth century, "the Lord and righteousness . . . also worked through the modern media."⁶

Nevertheless, through this rhetoric, symbolism, and use of the media, an oversimplified portrait of the movement and the region emerged. Many Americans (then and now) viewed the quest for racial equality as a simple dichotomy of good versus evil: virtually all black southerners (led exclusively by Martin Luther King Jr.) supported immediate integration and precipitated nonviolent mass protests against an oppressor race; on the other hand, the overwhelming majority of white southerners vocally and violently opposed these efforts and supported any means necessary (including terror and murder) to keep blacks in their proper place in society (which was always down). By perpetuating this symbolism, many civil rights activists, media elites, and scholars distorted the racial climate in Birmingham and throughout much of the South in the 1950s and 1960s. While concentrating almost exclusively on two polar positions, the media and, subsequently, scholars as well, focused only on those people in southern society most aggressively and politically engaged—especially those most vocally for, or opposed to, integration.

⁶ First King quote in Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 245; second King quote on p. 247. Porter quote in Michael Cooper Nichols, "'Cities Are What Men Make Them': Birmingham, Alabama Faces the Civil Rights Movement, 1963." (Senior honors thesis, Brown University, 1974), p. 282.

This perception of monolithic good versus monolithic evil provided a simplistic way for the media to cover, and for the public to understand, the events in Birmingham (and much of the civil rights movement). Clearly, targeted public relations efforts by the SCLC and a sympathetic press swayed national public opinion towards the civil rights cause. This left a somewhat distorted historical view of the movement and placed black and white southerners exclusively in two opposing camps. Reality was never so conveniently packaged. Historians must move beyond the emotion-packed incidents on the road to racial equality in the South. These events elicited emotional responses (both pro and con) from the media, the public, and scholars. Scholars must strive for a more objective way of examining the movement—looking at southern society as a whole, not just the politically active elements.

Even as early as the Emmett Till murder in 1955, national reporters made sweeping generalizations about white southerners and concluded that the violent actions of a few ignorant souls represented the white population en masse. Claude Sitton of the New York Times later recognized that national reporters focused almost exclusively on the scene of racial strife in the South and failed to tell readers, for good or bad, that life continued at a normal pace for a majority of citizens. The media failed to relate specific events to state, regional and national patterns, and often

demonstrated an amazing ignorance of previous conditions and current circumstances. This ignorance made possible a manipulation of the media by, what Sitton called, "charlatans on both sides of the issue, and there were many." Civil rights activist James Farmer agreed that every side of the racial debate attempted to use the media for their own purposes. The media was unable to avoid the manipulation of pressure groups in an American democracy, Farmer said.⁷

Many white southerners complained at the time that, seizing upon the poor behavior of belligerent segregationists, the national press had failed to communicate a fair and complete portrait of the social structure of the region and depicted all white southerners as worse than they really were.⁸ This focus on the two extremes of southern society, both ignored and alienated white and black advocates of a moderate or middle-of-the-road position. During the civil rights era, white attitudes toward segregation were divided into four (rather than just two) categories: belligerent segregationists, moderate segregationists, moderates, and liberals. Belligerent segregationists vocally and sometimes violently demanded no deviation from the status quo. The

⁷ David Halberstam, The Fifties, p. 440; Claude Sitton, "Racial Coverage: Planning and Logistics" in Paul L. Fisher and Ralph L. Lowenstein, Race and the News Media (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1967), pp. 77-8; Farmer quote in introduction to Fisher and Lowenstein, Race and the News Media, p. 6

⁸ Lewis M. Killian, White Southerners (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 40.

majority of whites were moderate segregationists. They remained a silent majority and passively accepted the social order as the southern way of life. At times they were swayed by arguments on both sides of the issue. Racial moderates, like the eight white clergy addressed in King's *Letter*, advocated racial equality and a gradual change in the social order (although the pace of change varied significantly from person to person). White liberals demanded revolutionary changes in southern society and fully supported the goals and tactics of the civil rights movement.

King and the media depicted the white moderate clergy addressed in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* as no better than the most belligerent segregationist. The "ultimate tragedy" of the Birmingham civil rights campaign, wrote Martin Luther King in 1963, was not the brutality of the belligerent segregationists, but the silence of the white moderates. "It was a silence born of fear," he wrote, "fear of social, political, and economic reprisals." Since the white community in Birmingham was seen as an evil monolith, the movement and the media cast the moderate white clergy as villains and heretics. Fred Shuttlesworth later reflected that in many ways, these white ministers were worse than Birmingham's notorious commissioner of public safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor.

"Their minds were stuck back in antiquity," Shuttlesworth said; "in the feudal ages, days of slavery. . . ." ⁹

By its very nature, racial moderates advocated a slow, gradual, evolutionary change in the racial status quo in the South. King and other SCLC officials readily dismissed and villainized the moderate position. If moderation slowed up the fight for racial justice, King once said, then moderation was a "tragic vice which members of our race must condemn." ¹⁰ For King and most activists in the civil rights movement, moderation was just another stalling technique of defiant white southerners.

Much of the *Letter* and King's subsequent book on the Birmingham campaign, Why We Can't Wait, refuted the moderate approach. King found moderation extremely difficult to combat. Confronting belligerent segregationists was often clear and direct, because it usually provoked an emotional and violent response. Confronting moderates, on the other hand, remained tricky; especially those who in principle agreed with the notions of equality. Moderation drained both passions and the sense of urgency to do something about civil rights. A moderate response also provided no dramatic symbols for media consumption. King recognized this. And, simply stated,

⁹ King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 43; Fred Shuttlesworth, telephone interview by author, tape recording, Cincinnati, Ohio, 23 April 1992.

¹⁰ Lionel Lokos, House Divided: The Life and Legacy of Martin Luther King (New York: Arlington House, 1968), p. 145.

journalists were remarkably better at reporting revolution than evolution.¹¹

The more dramatic the villain, staged demonstration, and ensuing confrontation, the better the news coverage. In the Birmingham campaign, Bull Connor emerged as the perfect villain for a publicity hungry SCLC. As one early biographer of King noted, the civil rights leader played the martyr's role in Birmingham as the "nation cheered the hero and hissed the villain" via the media. Journalist David Halberstam described King as a "dramatist" for a public morality play: with blacks wearing the white hats of the heroes and the whites wearing the sinister black hats of the villains. "A play required good casting," Halberstam wrote, "and Martin King soon learned to pick not just his venues carefully, but also his villains." In virtually every national media outlet, the press portrayed Birmingham as an epic battle between virtuous African Americans and violent whites.¹²

Through extensive media exposure in the 1950s and 1960s, King emerged as the symbol of righteousness in the civil rights struggle. King, his staff, and the media were able to create a symbolic aura surrounding the civil rights leader—capturing the popular imagination of most blacks and many non-southern whites. Although part of a long tradition

¹¹ Halberstam, The Fifties, pp. 442-43.

¹² Lokos, House Divided, p. 131; Halberstam, The Fifties, pp. 691-92; Nichols, "Cities," p. 299.

of protest leaders in the black community, King was the first national black protest leader to use the emerging medium of television.

As a leader in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the 1950s, King gained his first experience in the power of the modern media. While waiting for one of his first television interviews, King asked David Brinkley about how a NBC television camera operated. "I doubt it occurred to him," Brinkley remembered, "and it certainly did not occur to me that in future years he would use television as no one ever had before." The young civil rights leader learned quickly that utilizing and manipulating the media would play a vital role in tearing down the walls of segregation in the South.¹³

The press would also propel Martin Luther King into the national spotlight. The young minister received his secular ordination from the media in early 1957, when he appeared on the cover of Time magazine. As other print and television media outlets quickly followed with extensive profiles, the charismatic young preacher emerged as a lasting figure in American culture and became the symbol of the black struggle for racial equality in America. One southern correspondent soon had standing orders from his national newspaper to follow

¹³ David Brinkley, 11 Presidents, 4 Wars, 22 Political Conventions, 1 Moon Landing, 3 Assassinations, 2,000 Weeks of News and Other Stuff on Television and 18 Years of Growing Up in North Carolina (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 89; Halberstam, The Fifties, p. 557.

King wherever he went: "Go where the Mahatma goes," the editor said, "he might get killed."¹⁴

Fortunately for the civil rights struggle, the national press clearly coalesced behind the movement and placed the South under intense scrutiny. In the 1950s, the Emmett Till murder and subsequent trial, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the Little Rock integration crisis, provided the first images of white brutality and the dignity of the black struggle. Sympathetic members of the national mass media were more than willing to sway public opinion (especially in the North) in favor of the cause. Many of these early reporters of the southern scene, Johnny Popham and Claude Sitton of the New York Times, Dan Rather of CBS, and David Brinkley, John Chancellor, and Frank McGhee of NBC were native southerners or began their careers in the South and maintained an interest in seeing a change in the social order.

Moreover, television news executives were especially interested in the dramatic symbolism provided by the civil rights movement. Attempting to gain a legitimate foothold with newspapers and radio, television reporters needed highly emotional events to attract viewers. Southern journalist

¹⁴ See Time, February 18, 1957; Harry S. Ashmore, Hearts and Minds: The Anatomy of Racism From Roosevelt to Reagan (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982) p. 248; Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 203; southern correspondent quote in Pat Watters, Down to Now: Reflections on the Southern Civil Rights Movement (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), p. 265.

Harry S. Ashmore later reflected that television crews, while they still attempted to conform to journalistic style, treated the demonstrations as theatrical events. In turn, the movement legitimized television news just as the broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow had legitimized radio during World War II.¹⁵

The budding television news medium, however, threatened the dominant position of many of the nation's newspapers and magazines. National print editors desperately sought ways to exploit the drama of the movement in the pages of the nation's daily newspapers and weekly magazines. Dramatic photographs flashed around the world helped to impress the symbolism of the movement on most observers. Furthermore, King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* provided the print medium with the powerful oratory, raw emotion, and dignity of the black cause that had appeared on television and in photographs, but had been lacking in written columns.

Much of the power of the *Letter* and the civil rights movement as a whole, was the use of religious rhetoric and symbolism. King constantly looked to cast himself in powerfully symbolic roles and envisioned the whole civil rights movement in terms of Israel versus Egypt and the work of Moses to free a captive people. Historian Lewis V. Baldwin further termed this the "messianic role" of blacks as a chosen people capable of redeeming and transforming humanity. King

¹⁵ Ashmore, Hearts and Minds, p. 360; Halberstam, The Fifties, p. 689.

wrote of the spiritual power that blacks possessed as the conscience of America and how this power radiated love, understanding, good will, and nonviolence to the world. Through these ideals, King and the SCLC symbolically reenacted salvation aspects of the Gospel in public demonstrations before the media; where, as an observer noted, a victim secured "salvation for co-victims and victimizers alike."¹⁶

Black Americans had always symbolized their own experiences through Bible stories and figures. Stories of long suffering and deliverance from oppression paralleled the hopes of all blacks to overcome the struggle of slavery and segregation. African-American theology tended to blend biblical events with contemporary struggles. Accordingly, black ministers preached as if Old Testament heroes and New Testament apostles were frequent companions and old friends. The spiritual rhetoric elevated the movement to a Biblical epic and routinely cast Martin Luther King in several symbolic Old and New Testament roles.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hortense J. Spillers, "Martin Luther King and the Style of the Black Sermon" Black Scholar 3 (September 1971): 17-18; Lewis V. Baldwin, " 'Let Us Break Bread Together:' Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Church in the South, 1954-1968," in Cultural Perspectives on the American South, vol. 5, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (New York: Gordon & Breach, 1991), pp. 137-38; Theophus H. Smith, Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 211.

¹⁷ Malinda Snow, "Martin Luther King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' as Pauline Epistle,." Quarterly Journal of Speech 71 (August 1985): 319.

King often spoke as the black Moses, leading his people to the promised land. In January 1963, he promised to lead demonstrations in Birmingham until "Pharaoh lets God's people go." Five years later in his last public speech, King reflected that God had allowed him to climb the mountain, look over and see the promised land. "I may not get there with you," he said. "But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land." One of King's favorite roles was that of the Apostle Paul, who had left his hometown and carried the Gospel of Jesus Christ to "practically every hamlet and city" of the Roman world. "I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular home town," King wrote in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. "Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid."¹⁸

Many blacks looked to King as a messiah: Author Alice Walker remembered the inspiration she found the first time she saw King on television: "He was The One," she wrote, "The Hero, The One Fearless Person for whom we had waited. I hadn't even realized before that we had been waiting for Martin Luther King Jr., but we had." King's symbolic role as a black messiah became even more pronounced following his murder at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. One civil

¹⁸ First King quote in Stephen B. Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York: Mentor Press, 1982), p. 205; second King quote in Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 621; Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Albert Boutwell Papers, Birmingham Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts (hereafter cited as BPLDAM).

rights leader later called the motel a "modern day Calvary where a crusader for peace and justice was crucified." Jesse Jackson also proclaimed Memphis the black Calvary and Atlanta (King's birthplace) the movement's Bethlehem.¹⁹

King's messianic role in the civil rights struggle was canonized by the movement, the media, and the American public; culminating in the designation of a national day of honor in the 1980s. Several enthusiastic devotees even began a crusade in the late 1970s to include the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* as a book of the Bible. Elevating the rhetoric to such lofty realms made simple criticism of King and his tactics tantamount to opposing a special envoy of God. In hindsight, while other critics were long forgotten, the eight religious leaders addressed in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* were remembered simultaneously as heretics, pharisees, and bigots, because of the timing and subsequent canonization of the document. These clergy did not so much oppose the ultimate goals of the movement—an end to segregation and equal citizenship of blacks—but rather the methods and the timing.

How had King and the SCLC developed such expertise and media savvy? Style, prestige, and public perceptions in the black community always concerned the King family. In the 1930s, King's father had changed his own name, and that of his

¹⁹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich Publishers, 1983), p. 144; Joseph Lowery and Jesse Jackson quotes in *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 6, 1991.

son, from Michael to Martin following a trip to Wittenburg, Germany—the seed ground of Martin Luther's Protestant reformation. For the elder King, the name change signified his right of passage from a humble sharecropper to one of the most prestigious black pastors in Atlanta. For the younger King, as Taylor Branch wrote, the name change was a "mark of great expectations, a statement of identity that honored traditions in both religion and race."²⁰

Later on, as the twenty-six-year-old leader of a major boycott, King readily sought the advice of political operatives who displayed remarkable public relations and fund raising skills. Among this group were several New York liberals: Old Left intellectuals hungry to challenge the staid status quo of the 1950s. News of the Montgomery Bus Boycott spurred an interest in these radical leftists to help King. Noted pacifist Bayard Rustin was one of the first activists outside the confines of the black church drawn into King's life. Rustin provided King with connections to new organizations, ideas, people, and especially New York-style fund raising and publicity. Rustin even brought his own money man, Stanley Levison, into the movement. Also a leftist radical, Levison, a New York attorney, had specialized in fund

²⁰ Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 44.

raising for the American Jewish Congress and a variety of radical and civil libertarian causes.²¹

As an overnight media celebrity, King needed Rustin and Levison as key advisers in the art of public relations. They served as ghost writers for a number of King's speeches, articles, and books. The pair also helped develop the concept for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference--an organization clearly structured around King and his image. Levison, who became King's closest white friend, was particularly concerned with protecting and developing the proper image for the civil rights leader. He warned King of the dangers of the manipulative press corps and the tricky practices of reporters and editors. Before a meeting with Vice President Richard Nixon in 1957, Levison and Rustin prepared King by rehearsing the civil rights leader's private discussion with Nixon and his public statement to reporters following the meeting. The two advisors even drafted a lengthy memo that contained likely questions from reporters and proposed answers from King.²²

Nevertheless, despite efforts to promote King and the SCLC, the public and the media slowly lost interest after the Montgomery Bus Boycott. A voting rights campaign in the late

²¹ Adam Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), p. 28; Branch, Parting the Waters, pp. 168, 208.

²² Fairclough, To Redeem, p. 39; Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 218.

1950s was largely unsuccessful. For a time, King feared slipping into obscurity as a celebrated banquet speaker. At one point, Levison thought the best answer was to transform King into another popular television religious figure like Fulton Sheen and Billy Graham. "All we need is the sponsor to give us a half hour weekly," Levison wrote. "We already have the star."²³

Two events combined, however, in the early 1960s to reinvigorate the SCLC and Martin Luther King. The first was the student sit-ins of 1960 and the Freedom Rides of 1961, which led the entire movement into a new phase of intense activism. The second important development for King and the SCLC was the hiring of the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker as the new executive director in 1960. With a knack for organization and a natural media savvy, Walker soon directed most of the SCLC's publicity and fund raising efforts. Walker considered himself King's chief representative, key administrator, and the behind the scenes "son-of-a-bitch."²⁴

With Walker's skills, King and the SCLC followed the lead of student protesters and also entered a new phase of activity. Nevertheless, despite these positive factors, the SCLC's first attempt at a large scale demonstration in Albany,

²³ John White, Black Leadership In America: From Booker T. Washington to Jesse Jackson (New York: Longman Group, 1985), p. 123; Branch, Parting the Waters, pp. 225-26.

²⁴ Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 299; it is interesting to note that Rustin, Levison, and Walker all had Communist sympathies at one time in their lives.

Georgia in 1961-1962 was a failure. The demonstrations received virtually no positive publicity and no symbols of injustice to be exploited in the press. The SCLC discovered their chief villain, Albany's crafty police chief Laurie Pritchett, was a smooth operator who also recognized the importance of manipulating the media. With the tables turned, SCLC officials complained that Pritchett had become a "darling of the press." Pritchett was able to obtain positive press coverage for the segregated white South, while King's image suffered. Furthermore, competition for publicity and money with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and local civil rights leaders was also a factor in the debacle in Albany. Already on the scene before King and a flock of reporters moved in, SNCC and local leaders resented SCLC stealing the show. SNCC activists began cynically referring to King as "De Lawd."²⁵

The Albany failure damaged King's image and his use of nonviolent tactics.²⁶ Members of the press widely were highly

²⁵ E. Culpepper Clark, "The American Dilemma in King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,'" in Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse, eds. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), p. 37; Clark noted that the SCLC discovered their chief target, Albany's wily police chief Laurie Pritchett, was a "slippery target who knew who to flirt with the media;" Richard Lentz, Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 64, 68.

²⁶ Washington Post, April 5, 1963; at one point, King denied Albany was failure. "You can't ride a man's back unless it is bent. The negro in Albany is standing straight."

critical and branded the campaign one of the civil rights leader's most stunning defeats. In 1962, King recognized that the civil rights issue no longer "commanded the conscience of the nation." During the Albany campaign, many blacks had turned to violence, threatening the validity of a nonviolent movement for racial equality. Accordingly, the civil rights leader needed a big victory or nonviolence would be completely discredited.²⁷

Fred Shuttlesworth, the leader of the SCLC affiliate in Birmingham, Alabama, had the answer. "Birmingham is where it's at, gentlemen," Shuttlesworth told King and other SCLC officials. "I assure you, if you come to Birmingham, we will not only gain prestige but really shake the country. If you win in Birmingham, as Birmingham goes, so goes the nation." King and others in the SCLC agreed, believing that a direct action campaign in Alabama's largest city would give the movement a new image for the power of nonviolence. They also hoped it would restore King's prestige and bring in much needed cash to the SCLC. Eventually, the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* emerged as a central component in publicizing this new image and providing a justification of nonviolent tactics in the quest for racial equality.²⁸

²⁷ New York Herald-Tribune, December 19, 1961; Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 557; King quote in Ashmore, Hearts and Minds, p. 349.

²⁸ Glenn Thomas Eskew, "But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 1993), p. 289;

In early January 1963, Martin Luther King and his associates began planning for a mass campaign in Birmingham with Shuttlesworth and his SCLC affiliate, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Shuttlesworth saw segregation as the ultimate evil and continued to battle for equality while being beaten, bombed, and arrested. King believed Shuttlesworth was a courageous figure, whose "audacious public defiance" of segregation in Birmingham was an inspiration and a source of encouragement for blacks throughout the region.²⁹

Others in the civil rights movement had a different perspective on the Birmingham civil rights activist. The Rev. Glenn Smiley, a New York pacifist and a white official in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, reported in 1958 that while Shuttlesworth was a leader of great courage, he was also "head strong and wild for publicity." Birmingham minister and civil rights activist John Porter called Shuttlesworth a one man show. "Until King came to town," Porter said, "I wouldn't follow him through that door. . . ."³⁰ Shuttlesworth's small,

Shuttlesworth quote in Henry Hampton, Steve Fayer, Sarah Flynn, Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p. 125.

²⁹ William Nunnelle, Bull Connor (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1991), p. 130.

³⁰ Smiley quote in Fairclough, To Redeem, pp. 426-27; John Porter, interview by author, tape recording, Birmingham, Alabama, April 7, 1992.

but vocal group, however, provided the SCLC with a local protest organization and a base of support.

Furthermore in Birmingham, King and the SCLC built upon a selective buying campaign, organized by students at the black Miles College, that had been underway for several months (supported by Shuttlesworth's group). Unlike Albany, where the SCLC attacked segregation in general, the Birmingham campaign focused on the business community and the busy Easter shopping period. Wyatt Walker began detailed planning of specific stores. The SCLC was determined not to repeat the mistakes of the Albany campaign.³¹

King and his associates discussed plans for Birmingham at the old slave mission founded by Reverend Charles Colcock Jones Sr. at Dorchester, near Savannah, Georgia. In a twist of irony, Jones's great-grandson, C. C. J. Carpenter worked in Birmingham as the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama and was one of the ministers addressed in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Only a few weeks earlier, Carpenter had written a close friend about the prospect of a King visit to Birmingham. "His coming might cause a good bit of trouble," Carpenter wrote, "and just now things are moving along pretty smoothly . . . but a keg of dynamite might be blown up at any minute." Carpenter emphasized he was only speaking figuratively about the dynamite. Nevertheless, the minister

³¹ John Egerton, A Mind To Stay Here: Profiles from the South (London: Macmillan Company, 1970), pp. 110-11.

recognized the explosive nature of racial tensions in the city.³²

In Birmingham, as in most areas of the South, a wall of segregation separated blacks and whites. The two races had cultivated the customs and etiquette of segregation in the nineteenth century, even before the enactment of strict Jim Crow laws. Many of these customs descended naturally from the master-slave relationship in southern Antebellum society and by the twentieth century, the rituals of Jim Crow etiquette were a natural part of black-white relations in the South. Members of both races recognized and followed them closely. Among these rituals were "courtesy" titles; as white men called black men "boy," "Jack," or "George" and referred to black women as "aunt" or by their first name. The two races never shook hands, walked side-by-side, or socialized in public places.³³

From at least the mid-1880s, segregation by custom was commonplace in Birmingham. Private utility rules and old habits separated blacks and whites on the city's early streetcars and a pattern of residential segregation persisted without government ordinance. For forty years, the promise of

³² C. C. J. Carpenter to Will Scarlett, September 21, 1962, Charles Colcock Jones Carpenter Papers, BPLDAM, Birmingham, Alabama.

³³ Jack Temple Kirby, Darkness at the Dawning: Race and Reform in the Progressive South (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1972), p. 18. Vernon Lane Wharton, The Negro In Mississippi, 1865-1890 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), p. 230.

jobs persuaded thousands of blacks to leave the rural South for low-skilled jobs in this north-central Alabama city. By 1920, of the cities with one hundred thousand or more population, Birmingham had the highest percentage of blacks at 39 percent. In turn, many whites felt the need for a strong measure of social control. During the twenties, city officials enacted a series of laws separating blacks and whites in virtually all situations, including education, public facilities, and even innocent matches of dominoes, cards, and checkers. The enactment of segregation laws throughout the South, as historian C. Vann Woodward wrote, put government authority "in the voice of the street-car conductor, the railway brakeman, the bus driver, the theater usher, and also in the voice of the hoodlum of the parks and playgrounds." This voice of authority was particularly forceful and often brutal in Birmingham. A small hoodlum element of Klan activists in the white community committed terrorist acts against African Americans in the city, including cross-burnings, beatings, and bombings.³⁴

Considered the industrial center of the South, Birmingham was a tough, dirty town, with a lingering black soot so thick

³⁴ Carl V. Harris, "Reforms in Government Control of Negroes in Birmingham, Alabama, 1890-1920," Journal of Southern History 28 (November 1972): 570-71; Robert Gaines Corley, "The Quest For Racial Harmony: Race Relations In Birmingham, Alabama, 1947-63" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1979), pp. 24-25; C. Vann Woodward, Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), p. 96.

that street lights often burned during the daylight hours. If the Magic City had a golden era prior to 1963, it existed only in the minds and dreams of city officials and residents. For most citizens, the area's economy had stagnated as the city shifted from blue collar to white collar jobs during the 1950s and 1960s. Unemployment and competition for jobs grew fierce, adding to the racial tensions and climate of unrest.

Founded in 1871 during the heyday of the New South era, promoters boasted that Birmingham would soon rival Pittsburgh as the nation's steel and iron center. The hills surrounding the city offered rich deposits of iron ore, coal, and limestone—key ingredients for iron and steel making. Birmingham was a peculiar blend of northern capital, Old West frontier brutality, and New South hype. As one overzealous city father noted, Birmingham was the "Magic City of the World, the marvel of the South, the miracle of the Continent, the dream of the Hemisphere, the vision of all Mankind."³⁵

Reality, however, never matched the hopeful rhetoric. Years later in 1937, Charles Leighton reported for *Harpers Magazine* that Birmingham was still a city of "perpetual promise"—never quite living up to optimistic, flamboyant civic boosterism. On top of Red Mountain, a large cast iron statue of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire and metal served as the great symbol of the city. Holding a hammer in one hand

³⁵ Blaine A. Brownell, "Birmingham, Alabama: New South City in the 1920s." Journal of Southern History 38 (February 1972): 48.

and a spear in the other, Vulcan emerged as a strange pagan symbol for a place that boasted of being a "city of churches." Nevertheless, wildly exaggerated hype continued throughout the racial turmoil. Even in 1963, Mayor Art Hanes bragged that Birmingham was the nation's "last outpost of gracious living [and] warm hospitality."³⁶

Obviously, throughout Birmingham's history, the city's image remained a fixation for many citizens. Before King focused on Birmingham, the national media had closely examined the peculiar nature of race relations in the "Magic City." Media scrutiny had given the city's residents a heightened sense of inferiority and paranoia. Politicians like Bull Connor often railed against "junkateering journalists" and preached that Birmingham had been held back because of "Communism, socialism, and journalism."³⁷

In two articles appearing on the front page of the New York Times in 1960, journalist Harrison E. Salisbury reported that whites and blacks in Birmingham shared a "community of fear."

Every channel of communication, every medium of mutual interest, every reasoned approach, every inch of middle

³⁶ George R. Leighton, "Birmingham, Alabama: The City of Perpetual Promise," *Harpers Magazine*, August 1937, pp. 225-27; Wayne Flynt, "Religion in the Urban South: The Divided Religious Mind of Birmingham, 1900-1930." Alabama Review 30 (April 1977): 109. Irving Beiman, "Birmingham: Steel Giant With a Glass Jaw," in Our Fair City, ed. Robert S. Allen (New York: Vanguard Press, 1947), p. 101; Hanes quote in David Cort, "The Voices of Birmingham," Nation, 27 July 1963, p. 47.

³⁷ Connor quote in Nichols, "Cities," p. 135.

ground has been fragmented by the emotional dynamite of racism, reinforced by the whip, the razor, the gun, the bomb, the torch, the club, the knife, the mob, the police and many branches of the state's apparatus.³⁸

The Birmingham News reprinted the article under the headline: "N.Y. Times slanders our city—Can this be Birmingham?" and branded Salisbury's work as "a shoddy, vicious type of reporting."³⁹ In turn, the city commissioners led by Bull Connor sued the New York Times for libel.

In the article, Salisbury noted that the city's whites and blacks never talked freely and lived in a virtual police state ruled by Connor. City officials tapped telephone lines and intercepted mail. "The eavesdropper, the informer, the spy" were a fact of life, Salisbury wrote. Even a nameless Birmingham pastor closed his door before speaking openly about race. Later identified as the "pastor," Rabbi Milton Grafman insisted the Times' reporter had misrepresented the closed door meeting: the rabbi always met with people in his office with the door closed, regardless of the topic of discussion. The moderate Grafman resented the way the Times had singled out Birmingham from all the other cities in the Deep South with racial tensions. Salisbury indicted, tried, and convicted every citizen of bigotry and hatred, the rabbi believed. The reporter had focused only on the negative and failed to search for those citizens trying to turn the city

³⁸ See New York Times, April 12, 1961, April 13, 1961.

³⁹ "Birmingham: Brinkmanship in Race Relations," Christian Century (May 29, 1962), p. 689.

around. Regardless, Grafman later insisted all the negative publicity helped Birmingham turn a "moral microscope" on the city's racial problems. The publicity also helped the nation consider the question of the black race's place in American society.⁴⁰

Yet, by the 1960s, most white southerners, no matter what their racial outlook, had grown weary of the constant criticism from other regions of the country. As southern author Ralph Creger noted, "it wasn't so much the race issue as just being constantly criticized in the nation's press, which put so many on the defensive."⁴¹ This was certainly true in Birmingham during the early 1960s, as national scrutiny and criticism made the eight white ministers sensitive to the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and the subsequent negative media portraits.

In reality, there was little doubt Birmingham had tremendous racial problems. To illustrate further these difficulties and to gain press interest, Martin Luther King Jr. and other SCLC activists cultivated the image of Birmingham as the definitive symbol of segregation—describing the city as the most segregated in America; the "tragic city" (rather than the "Magic City"); "Old Burninghell" or

⁴⁰ New York Times, April 12, 1961, April 13, 1961; Grafman quotes in undated newspaper clipping, Rabbi Milton L. Grafman Papers, copies in possession of author.

⁴¹ Ralph Creger, A Look Down the Lonesome Road (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1964), p. 72.

"Bombingham;" the "Johannesburg of the South;" the "dark city;" "America's most racially bigoted city;" the "worst city on earth (besides Johannesburg, South Africa);" or a "poor excuse for a city."⁴² Symbolically, King hoped for broad results from the campaign in Alabama. "If we can crack Birmingham," he said, "I'm convinced we can crack the South." Fortunately for the movement, the media opened a breach. Local civil rights activist Abraham Woods believed the national media was extremely interested in "pulling the cover off the cancer of racism" in Birmingham.⁴³

While attacking Birmingham's image in general, King and the movement also focused on the city's symbolic embodiment of segregation: Bull Connor. As one national news magazine reported in 1963, Connor was as much a monument to segregation in Birmingham as Vulcan was a shrine to the city's steel economy. Connor ruled much of the city government with an iron fist and often bragged that he needed only "two policemen and a dog" to solve the city's racial problems. Wyatt Walker stressed that when the movement came to Birmingham, they knew old Bull would benefit their cause. "My theory was that if we mounted a strong nonviolent movement, the opposition would

⁴² King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 50; Eskew, "But For Birmingham," p. 354; Washington Post, May 13, 1963; King, "Eulogy for the Martyred Children," in Testament of Hope, p. 222; Fred Shuttlesworth, "Birmingham Shall Be Free Some Day" Freedomways, Winter 1964, p 16; Corts, "The Voices," p. 47.

⁴³ King quote in Eskew, "But For Birmingham," p. 369; Woods quote in Rigsby, "A Rhetorical Clash," p. 87.

surely do something to attract the media, and in turn induce national sympathy and attention to the everyday segregated circumstance of a black person living in the Deep South," Walker said.⁴⁴

Accordingly, King instructed Walker to find a way to make Connor "tip his hand." The SCLC, journalist Pat Watters later wrote, implemented a "shrewd, normal American, cynical stratagem" in Birmingham. They recognized Connor displayed "stupidity and natural viciousness" that played "into their hands, for full exploitation in the press as an archfiend and villain." Had Connor quietly ignored the protesters, Walker insisted, there would have been no publicity and in turn, no movement.⁴⁵

In 1963, however, while King targeted Birmingham, the city's moderate business and civic leaders hoped for an end to Connor's belligerent stranglehold on the city and an ease in racial tensions. In November 1962 Birmingham citizens voted overwhelmingly to replace the old Progressive Era, three-man city commission with a mayor-city council form of government. Connor wanted the job of mayor, as did several others, including the moderate segregationist, former Alabama

⁴⁴ "Bull at Bay," Newsweek (April 15, 1963), p. 29; Connor quote in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Robert Kennedy and His Times. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 328; Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 228; Walker quote in Hampton, et al. Voices of Freedom, p. 125.

⁴⁵ Lentz, Symbols, p. 84; Watters, Down to Now, p. 266; Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 228; Nichols, "Cities," p. 286.

lieutenant governor Albert Boutwell. In his campaign, Boutwell pledged to provide a new civic image for Birmingham. In turn, Connor scoffed and simply labeled his rival "The Image"—a public relations puppet of the city's business elites. No candidate received a majority of the votes in the March 5, 1963 election and the city scheduled a run-off election between Connor and Boutwell on April 2. Fearful of giving Connor a great campaign issue, King reluctantly rescheduled the demonstrations for the day after the run-off election.⁴⁶

On Tuesday April 2 nearly 75 percent of Birmingham's registered voters participated in the election, giving Boutwell an impressive eight thousand vote victory over Connor. Ironically, the press reported that 50 percent of the city's whites voted for Boutwell and the margin of victory had been decided by a solid block of the eight thousand registered black voters. The next morning Boutwell happily proclaimed the dawn of a new era in Birmingham and pointed to the optimistic spirit of citizens. A Birmingham News editorial cartoonist captured the spirit in a front page drawing of a bright sun rising over the city. Yet, as the new mayor

⁴⁶ Nunnelley, Bull Connor, p. 134; Connor quote in "Bull at Bay," Newsweek, p. 29 King, Why We Can't Wait, pp. 43-44, 70-71; King believed Connor could have used the protests as an "emotion-charged" issue to rally white support.

celebrated his victory, two dozen nervous protesters invaded lunch counters at four downtown stores.⁴⁷

At the beginning of the movement, King restated his commitment to nonviolence and emphasized the special mission blacks had to end segregation. "You must always refuse to use violence on your opponent," he said. "I know sometimes this is hard to do, but our cause is great and noble, no physical violence and no violence of spirit. Remember our white brothers are just misguided. We are not going to give up and we must let them know that, but we must not lower our love for our white brother."⁴⁸

Fortunately for King and the movement, hopes for a smooth transition of city governments were dashed when Connor and defeated city commissioners Jabo Waggoner and Art Hanes contested the election, contending that their terms of office did not expire until November 1965. The commissioners refused to relinquish government control until the Alabama Supreme Court ruled on the case. Boutwell and the new city council, however, were determined to take the oath of office on April 15. The prospect of two governments operating simultaneously led Birmingham News managing editor John Bloomer to quip that Birmingham was the "only city in the world with two mayors and

⁴⁷ Washington Post, May 13, 1963; Wallace Terry reported that a "solid Negro vote" of over 7,000 ballots appeared to be the margin of victory against Connor; Birmingham News, April 3, 1963; Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 236; Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 722.

⁴⁸ Nunnellely, Bull Connor, p. 139.

a King." Connor remained in firm control of the police and fire departments. "I don't know how long I will be here," Connor announced, "but King can rest assured that as long as I am here, he better tell his crowd not to violate any laws."⁴⁹

King announced four public demands to begin the move toward legal justice for Birmingham's black community 1) Desegregation of lunch counters and other public facilities; 2) Fair hiring practices; 3) A merchant request to have charges dropped against demonstrators under arrest. 4) Establishment of a biracial commission with power to institute peaceful school desegregation plans. Fred Shuttlesworth insisted to the press that demonstrations had occurred because the business community had reneged on a desegregation pledge in September.⁵⁰

After the first day of protests, the arrest of demonstrators at Britt's lunch counter inside the J. J. Newberry's department store on Nineteenth Street North proceeded with little local attention. Birmingham's white citizens and the local press focused on the change in city government, the beginning of spring practice for Paul "Bear" Bryant's University of Alabama football team, and the hometown movie premiere of Harper Lee's "To Kill A Mockingbird" at the

⁴⁹ Bloomer quote in Ibid, p. 145; Connor quote in Washington Post, April 5, 1963.

⁵⁰ Washington Post, April 5, 1963, April 9, 1963.

Melba Theater. Huge crowds jammed the street in front of the theater to catch a glimpse of the movie's two child stars: Birmingham natives Mary Badham and Phillip Alford. Although the movie characterized fictiously the racial injustice in Alabama during the 1930s, it provided no great awakening for most Birmingham citizens in 1963. But whites were ill prepared for the morality play on the streets of Birmingham during the succeeding month.⁵¹

Initially, editors of the two local daily newspapers, the Birmingham News and the Birmingham Post-Herald decided to downplay coverage of the demonstrations. During the preceding months, the two featured page one stories about civil rights demonstrations in other areas of the South. Ironically, both civil rights activist Fred Shuttlesworth and his "unwilling ally" Alabama Governor George Wallace criticized the lack of press coverage in Alabama's two largest daily newspapers. Wallace complained of a "complete news blackout" about Birmingham. News was news, he said. Shuttlesworth hoped the publishers would get the message that the demonstrations had become "front page business" in Alabama.⁵²

Nevertheless, King's demonstrations to win the "heart and conscience" of Birmingham's population met stiff resistance

⁵¹ Birmingham News, April 3, 1963.

⁵² Birmingham News, April 5, 1963; Shuttlesworth continued: "I think Mr. George [Wallace] wants to come in to see what we're doing. Well, let's do a great big job so when he comes around to see what we're doing, we'll ask him to help us. Come on in, Mr. George, we're all here."

not only from local segregationists, but moderates and liberals of both races, as well as a flood of national criticism. On April 4, a Birmingham News editorial called on citizens to ignore the demonstrators. These outsiders created "strife and discord" in the city's streets and only desired headlines and publicity. Prophetically, the News predicted that they would receive media coverage in full measure if the demonstrators provoked the city. But at the time, their "sideshow" was "playing to an empty house."⁵³

For the most part, the national press seemed to agree. Widespread, sympathetic press reaction failed to materialize during the first few days of the movement. The first extensive news coverage occurred after a violent confrontation with Birmingham police on Sunday, April 7. Bull Connor provided the brutal images of segregation that Walker and the SCLC had looked for when he released a squad of growling police dogs. Walker jumped for joy and proclaimed over and over: "We've got a movement. We've got a movement. We had some police brutality. They brought out the dogs. We've got

⁵³ C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 170-71; Birmingham News, April 4, 1963.

a movement."⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Connor quickly withdrew the symbols of brutality and the media once again lost interest.

To help ease rising tensions in Birmingham, the new mayor and members of the new council, not yet in office, promised to openly discuss black grievances in return for King's withdrawal. The Washington Post editorialized that a "few weeks more without direct action in Birmingham was a short time to wait to see if political action were successful." A few days later, the Post called marches on Palm Sunday of "doubtful utility." Birmingham had already achieved a victory, or a near victory, through the best possible way; the democratic election process. "This administration deserves a fair trial."⁵⁵

The Justice Department and Attorney General Robert Kennedy urged a postponement of the demonstrations until Boutwell and the new council were in firm control. America's foremost evangelist, the Reverend Billy Graham, believed King had complicated the racial situation in Birmingham. The timing of the demonstration was questionable and Graham urged civil rights leaders to "put the brakes on a little bit." The minister hoped to see a "period of quietness in which

⁵⁴ James Forman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries (Seattle, Washington: Open Hand Publishing, Inc., 1985), p. 312; Forman, who witnessed Walker's outburst, said: "It was a disgusting moment for me for it seemed very cold, cruel, and calculating to be happy about police brutality coming down on innocent people . . . no matter what purpose it served;" see also Garrow, Bearing the Cross, pp. 239-40.

⁵⁵ Washington Post, April 5, 1963, April 14, 1963.

moderation prevailed." The eight white ministers in Birmingham soon joined this chorus of critics. As author Taylor Branch wrote, all of these viewpoints dismissed both King and Connor as "dangerous, polar extremists."⁵⁶

Time magazine also criticized the SCLC campaign as a "poorly timed protest" and noted that for many blacks in Birmingham, King's efforts had "inflamed tensions at a time when the city seemed to be making some progress, however small, in race relations." In the "Magic City," many local black leaders were equally critical of the movement. Emory O. Jackson, the editor of the black newspaper, the Birmingham World, branded the campaign "wasteful and worthless" and pleaded with all responsible citizens to show a degree of restraint in the community's best interest. Previously, black millionaire and civic leader A. G. Gaston had strenuously opposed the demonstrations and called on black citizens to rally around "local colored" leaders, and for both races to work together in an harmonious spirit of brotherly love to solve the racial conflict.⁵⁷

King, however, believed that any mass demonstration had to face the outcries from those who said it was poorly timed. "Our cup of endurance runneth over," he said. The

⁵⁶ Graham quote in New York Times, April 17, 1963; Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 737.

⁵⁷ Time, April 19, 1963; Birmingham World, April 10, 1963; Branch, Parting the Waters, pp. 703, 726, 737; Gaston, however, later provided some vocal and financial support.

demonstrations had been planned for the day after the election, no matter the victor and would test the good faith of Birmingham's new image. He had no plans to stop. Some form of nonviolent direct action would happen everyday, King predicted, until "peaceful equality" had been assured. The civil rights leader added that he believed the new mayor would never desegregate the city voluntarily. In a few weeks, King and the SCLC used the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* as a way to provide a detailed answer to these widespread criticisms.⁵⁸

Among the most skeptical of King's critics were most of Birmingham's black religious leaders. The Rev. J. L. Ware, one of Birmingham's most prominent and influential black ministers, and many of his colleagues trumpeted the bad timing of King's campaign. King countered the ministers with a powerful theological sermon, stressing the addition of the social gospel to enrich the gospel of individual salvation (a point later emphasized in the *Letter*). King surmised that a "dry as dust" Christianity prompted a "minister to extol the glories of heaven while ignoring the social conditions that caused man an earthly hell." The social gospel symbolized the true witness of a Christian, he avowed, and the greatest example of an "inner, spiritual church." "If you can't stand

⁵⁸ Washington Post, April 5, 1963, April 7, 1963.

up with your people," King told Birmingham's black ministers, "you are not fit to be a preacher."⁵⁹

His persuasive argument before the ministers on Monday, April 8 earned King vocal support from the black clergy, including a unanimous statement of support by Ware's Baptist Ministers Alliance. King, however, needed more than a verbal argument to sway skeptical blacks to join the movement and physically champion his crusade. He must present himself as a living sacrifice for the movement and demonstrate the power of nonviolence in breaking down the barriers of segregation.⁶⁰ This was certainly of symbolic importance for many African Americans in Birmingham.

Since the campaign's commencement, many blacks wondered if King was indeed willing to go to jail. Early on in the Birmingham campaign, King announced his plans to go to jail, because it was better to "go to jail in dignity than to accept segregation." At a mass rally at the First Baptist Church of Ensley on April 8, King's closest friend and associate, Reverend Ralph Abernathy announced he and King were leading a crowd of protestors to jail on Wednesday, April 10. "Are you

⁵⁹ King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 65; Playboy Interview with Martin Luther King, Jr., January 1965, reprinted in James Washington, ed., A Testament Of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1986), p. 345; Fairclough, To Redeem, p. 119.

⁶⁰ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 240; Fairclough, To Redeem, p. 119; Wyatt Walker later estimated that only ten percent actively supported the movement.

going to jail with me?" Abernathy asked the crowd. He described the publicity involved: "If you go with me President Kennedy will be looking in, Lyndon Johnson will be looking in and Old Bull will be shaking in his boots." King, however, postponed leading a demonstration several times before deciding to lead a march on Good Friday. "I can't think of a better day than Good Friday for a move for freedom," he told an enthusiastic crowd. The Biblical symbolism was obvious—on Good Friday Jesus had made the ultimate sacrifice at Calvary and now King symbolically followed in his footsteps to free a captive people.⁶¹

Late that same evening, Birmingham city attorneys received an *ex parte* injunction from Circuit Judge William A. Jenkins, forbidding King and over a hundred other movement participants from sponsoring, encouraging or participating in mass demonstrations without a permit. King had received word early in the day on Wednesday that the injunction would be served. When Jefferson County Deputy Sheriff Raymond E. Belcher entered the restaurant at the Gaston Motel a few minutes after 1 a.m., King and Walker had assembled a group of reporters to witness and record the event. Belcher served the

⁶¹ Abernathy quote in Birmingham Police Department Inter-Office Communication, April 10, 1963, Report of Meeting at First Baptist Church of Ensley, April 8, 1963, Eugene "Bull" Connor Papers, BPLDAM, Birmingham, Alabama; Ibid., April 11, 1963, Report of Meeting at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, April 9, 1963, Connor Papers; King quote in Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 240; Willie Morris, The South Today: 100 Years After Appomattox (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 265.

papers and quickly exited as cameramen snapped pictures of King, Abernathy, and Shuttlesworth reading the injunction. Shuttlesworth called the injunction a "flagrant denial of our constitutional rights" that would "in no way . . . retard the thrust of this movement." Following the brief show for the media, King instructed Walker to prepare a formal press statement in response to the injunction and schedule another news conference for the next morning. The decision to disobey the injunction had been made several weeks before at a March meeting in entertainer Harry Belafonte's New York apartment. There, King and movement leaders decided that if the courts issued an injunction to discourage demonstrations, "it would be our duty to violate it."⁶²

At a Thursday morning press conference, King, Abernathy, and Shuttlesworth appeared before the assembled press dressed in old work clothes. King read from Walker's prepared statement and announced that in good conscience he could not obey an injunction, which was an "unjust, undemocratic, and unconstitutional misuse of the legal process." The civil rights leader told the media he would lead the Good Friday march, go to jail, and stay as long as necessary. Previously,

⁶² Birmingham News, April 11, 1963; also see Howell Raines, My Soul Is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 143; Shuttlesworth quote in Alan F. Westin and Barry Mahoney, The Trial of Martin Luther King (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1974), pp. 76-77; King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 70. Shuttlesworth, interview; Fred Shuttlesworth had insisted that if "any judge" issued an injunction "we would not stop . . . because a court injunction could kill the movement."

King and the SCLC had obeyed federal injunctions "out of respect for the forthright and consistent leadership" of the higher courts in integration matters. "However," he continued, "we are now confronted with recalcitrant forces in the Deep South that will use the courts to perpetuate the unjust and illegal systems of racial separation."⁶³

Abernathy told reporters at the gathering that Christ had died on the cross nearly two thousand years ago and "tomorrow we will take it up for our people and die if necessary." Fred Shuttlesworth later agreed that the decision to send King to jail was symbolic. "It came at a time when the whole Jesus on the Cross significance was before the whole world for Easter," Shuttlesworth said. As King wanted, the movement "transformed the jails into church houses."⁶⁴

Not leaving anything to chance, Wyatt Walker telephoned Birmingham Police Chief Inspector W. J. Haley and announced the decision to "make a march" on city hall on Good Friday at 12:15 p.m. "In my opinion," Haley told Walker, "that would be a violation of the city ordinance." The inspector told Walker to obtain a permit or face certain arrest. "Convey that information to Martin Luther," he added.⁶⁵ Walker was simply

⁶³ First King quote in Westin and Mahoney, Trial, pp. 78-79; second King quote in Washington Post, April 12, 1963.

⁶⁴ Abernathy quote in William Kunstler, Deep in My Heart (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1966), p. 185; Shuttlesworth quote in Birmingham News, January 19, 1966.

⁶⁵ *Walker v. City of Birmingham*, #249 October Term, 1966; 388 U.S. 307 (1967).

providing police with the exact time and approximate location to ensure an arrest and, he hoped, plenty of press coverage.

That Thursday night at a mass meeting in the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, Abernathy reiterated the pledge to march to City Hall on Good Friday. "We are going to turn this town upside down and inside out tomorrow," he told the crowd. "I'm not going to fail tomorrow and M. L. King's not going to fail tomorrow and lots more of us are not going to fail tomorrow. . . . We are going to a higher judge than Judge Jenkins."⁶⁶

Privately, however, King wrestled with the decision to participate in the march. The movement needed bail money and the civil rights leader remained the principal fund raiser. He recognized, however, that his incarceration would give the movement a crucial boost and would perhaps provide extensive national press coverage. On Good Friday morning, King listened attentively to the advice of his counselors. He retreated into his bedroom at the Gaston Motel for a few moments of solitude and prayer. He soon emerged from the room and announced his intent to march. "The path is clear to me," he said. "I've got to march. I've got so many people depending on me. I've got to march."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Abernathy quote in Birmingham Police Department Inter-Office Communication, April 12, 1963, Report of Meeting at Sixth Avenue Baptist Church, April 11, 1963, Connor Papers.

⁶⁷ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, pp. 241-42; Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 728; King's rhetoric swayed the black community to his side verbally, but not physically--only 150 protesters were jailed during the campaign's first ten days and a mere fifty committed to accompany King on Good Friday.

It was nearly 2 p.m. before King, Abernathy, and Shuttlesworth (each dressed in matching plain gray shirts and denim work pants) arrived at the Sixth Avenue Zion Hill Baptist Church to begin the march. Around fifty official protestors and several hundred spectators had gathered in the Zion Hill sanctuary on Sixth Avenue North near Fourteenth Street—roughly seven blocks from City Hall. Hundreds of other blacks stood along the sidewalks to observe the march. From the pulpit, King contended that only a "redemptive influence of suffering" would change Birmingham. The civil rights leader hoped to provide a true model of long suffering by marching to jail as "a good servant of my Lord and Master, who was crucified on Good Friday." As the civil rights trio moved toward the doorway, someone in the crowd looked at King and said: "There he goes. Just like Jesus."⁶⁸

The official marchers emerged from the church with King, Abernathy, and Shuttlesworth leading the way. Singing the movement anthem "We Shall Overcome," the group made its way down the north side of Sixth Avenue along cracked sidewalks and through the rundown black neighborhood. Shuttlesworth slipped back through the crowd and left the march. Leading the marchers side-by-side in columns of two, King and Abernathy proceeded in the bright afternoon sun, both carrying coats draped over one arm for warmth in the cold Birmingham Jail. Spectators lined the marchers' path and a large group

⁶⁸ Oates, Let The Trumpet, p. 213

shadowed the demonstrators from across the street: some clapped and shouted words of encouragement; others sang freedom songs; some knelt on the sidewalk in silence. Wyatt Walker walked alongside snapping photographs that would help him begin obtaining extensive press coverage and dramatic symbols of brutal segregation. Members of the press were also on hand closely documenting the march.⁶⁹

Birmingham police had placed barricades along the marchers' route and prevented automobile traffic from entering the area. Forty-eight policemen swarmed the vicinity on three- and two-wheel motorcycles, as did three patrol wagons, and five or six cars; scores of other officers trooped around on foot. Police moved all white spectators out of the district to "keep any breach of the peace from happening." and to protect the people "inciting trouble" (the marchers). The only whites allowed to observe were the police and members of the press.⁷⁰

Moving at a moderate pace, the protestors passed beside the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and encountered a barricade in the next block at the intersection of Sixth Avenue and Seventeenth Street. Catching the Birmingham police off guard, King, Abernathy, and the marchers suddenly crossed the street and moved south on Seventeenth Street (along side Kelly Ingram Park) away from City Hall and toward the central

⁶⁹ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 242.

⁷⁰ *Walker v. City of Birmingham* (1967).

business district. After another block, the marchers turned left on Fifth Avenue and police caught up with them near a Hill's Super Market. Bull Connor stood in the middle of street and bellowed, "Stop them . . . Don't let them go any farther." Two motorcycle officers pulled their three-wheel vehicles into the marchers' path and paddy wagons quickly arrived. King, Abernathy and the other marchers immediately dropped to their knees on the sidewalk and bowed their heads in prayer. A lanky motorcycle patrolmen quickly hurried King and Abernathy toward a waiting police van. The same patrolman grabbed Abernathy by the back of his shirt and propelled him toward a waiting van. A pudgy, middle aged Jack Warren, head of the patrol division, stepped over and gingerly squeezed the back of King's black leather belt and led him away. King waited calmly as Warren unlocked the side door to the police vehicle. Other officers arrested the balance of the protestors and headed toward the Birmingham Jail located at 501 Sixth Avenue on the city's south side.⁷¹

Some years earlier Bull Connor had planted the first of four hundred rose bushes in an effort to transform the jail (often called the "Southside Hilton") into a botanical showcase for the city. The old L&N Railroad tracks stretched south close behind the white-painted concrete and brick buildings. Late in the evening, the engineers operating the

⁷¹ Chicago Tribune, April 13, 1963; Washington Post, April 13, 1963; Nunnellely, Bull Connor, pp. 142-43.

massive steam engines had to let off a long steady whistle blast as they approached the Avenue F crossing. In 1923 those lonesome wails inspired Jimmy Tarlton, a prisoner arrested for selling bootleg whiskey, to pen the folk ballad: "Birmingham Jail." "Write me a letter;" he lamented, "save it for mail; send it in care of the Birmingham Jail." Forty years later, the insides of the jail had changed very little. Assistant wardens dressed in blue wash trousers, regulation blue police shirts, and black bow ties led King through the heavy iron doors up to the second floor of the new building (erected in 1912) and placed the civil rights leader in an isolation cell—supposedly for his own protection.⁷²

The fifty-four-square-foot, third isolation cell had only a few scant furnishings for King: a six-foot cot with metal slats and no mattress, a sink, a toilet, a metallic mirror on the back wall, and no overhead light. The burden of absolute solitude greatly distressed King and sent him descending into a period of deep depression. The civil rights leader recalled

⁷² Newspaper Clipping Files, Birmingham Jail File, Birmingham Public Library Tutwiler Collection of Southern History and Literature, Birmingham Alabama (hereafter cited as Tutwiler Collection); Birmingham News, November 18, 1974; according to most historical accounts, police held King incommunicado for at least twenty-four hours. Some evidence suggests this may have not been the case. At that time, Birmingham Police Chief Jamie Moore stated those claims were "ridiculous." In addition, police granted New York NAACP attorney Norman Amaker permission to see King on Good Friday, but only with guards present. Amaker refused. Abernathy later said that it had "never occurred to us that we might be entitled to call a lawyer ourselves." See Ralph David Abernathy, And the Walls Came Tumbling Down (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 253.

those hours as the "most frustrating and bewildering" he had ever lived. He pondered the effect his jail term had on the movement, fund raising, and community morale.⁷³

King's first contact with the outside occurred late Saturday afternoon with a brief visit from movement attorneys.⁷⁴ On Sunday afternoon, movement lawyers Orzell Billingsley and Arthur Shores met with King and on Monday attorney Clarence Jones made a lengthy visit. At some point during these visits by the movement legal trust, King apparently read or received news of a published statement by a group of eight white clergy from Birmingham. Unlike King's other confrontations in Birmingham, this campaign would not take place on the streets or at a lunch counter, but in the pages of America's newspapers, journals, and magazines.

⁷³ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, pp. 243, 670; King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 73.

⁷⁴ Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound, pp. 213-14; Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 243; Oates noted that a lone lawyer visited King briefly on Saturday just to "make sure he was all right;" while Garrow emphasized more than one movement attorney paying a visit.

CHAPTER II

EIGHT CLERGY: A PLEA FOR MODERATION AND PATIENCE

Blessed is he who keeps the law—Proverbs 29:18

As Martin Luther King Jr. prepared to begin his Good Friday march, a group of eight white clergy gathered a few blocks away for a luncheon meeting at the old Tutwiler Hotel. Hoping to find ways of maintaining harmony and peace during the demonstrations, the eight clergy were among the most prominent religious leaders in the state of Alabama: Methodist Bishops Nolan Harmon and Paul Hardin; Episcopal Bishops Charles Carpenter and George Murray; Catholic Bishop Joseph Durick; Edward Ramage, moderator of the Synod of Alabama, Presbyterian Church in the United States (the southern branch of Presbyterianism) and pastor of the prestigious First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham; Rabbi Milton Grafman of the reformed Temple Emanu-El; and Earl Stallings, who filled the pulpit at the First Baptist Church of Birmingham.¹

These clergy met from time to time to discuss the rising racial tensions in the state. When the civil rights demonstrations began in Birmingham in early April, they felt the need to issue a formal statement to the local press:

¹ Nolan Harmon, Ninety Years & Counting: Autobiography of Nolan B. Harmon (Nashville, Tennessee: The Upper Room, 1983), pp. 298-301.

We the undersigned clergymen are among those who, in January, issued "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense", in dealing with racial problems in Alabama. We expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts, but urged that decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed.

Since that time there had been some evidence of increased forbearance and a willingness to face facts. Responsible citizens have undertaken to work on various problems which cause racial friction and unrest. In Birmingham, recent public events have given indication that we all have opportunity for a new constructive and realistic approach to racial problems.

However, we are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.

We agree rather with certain local negro leadership which has called for honest and open negotiation of racial issues in our area. And we believe this kind of facing of issues can best be accomplished by citizens of our own metropolitan area, white and negro, meeting with their knowledge and experience of the local situation. All of us need to face that responsibility and find proper channels for its accomplishment.

Just as we formerly pointed out that "hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions", we also point out that such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham.

We commend the community as a whole, and the local news media and law enforcement officials in particular, on the calm manner in which these demonstrations have been handled. We urge the public to continue to show restraint should the demonstrations continue, and the law enforcement officials to remain calm and continue to protect our city from violence.

We further strongly urge our own negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham.

When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.²

The statement appeared in the two Birmingham papers on Saturday, April 13, 1963. With this public statement, these ministers had simply joined a chorus of moderate and liberal King critics from throughout the country. The subsequent dramatic events in Birmingham and especially the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* distorted the timing and context of the white clergy's statement. While other critics of the movement in Birmingham were soon forgotten, these white clergymen were remembered as the voices of opposition. Ultimately King and his associates used the white ministers in an impersonal public relations campaign. Nevertheless, a personal component remained in this story: Individually addressed in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, the white ministers were unwillingly thrust from the local stage into the national spotlight and had their personal racial beliefs and public actions generally misrepresented.

Remarkably, the eight white clergy shared much in common with Martin Luther King Jr. They were all southerners; each spending most of their adult lives and careers below the Mason-Dixon line. Most of the ministers had ancestral ties to organized religion and came out of an elite, upper-middle

² Carpenter, et al., *Ministers' Statement*, April 12, 1963, Carpenter Papers; see Appendix.

class. The eight religious leaders all supported the concepts of racial justice and black equality in a broad sense.

Nevertheless, they disagreed with Martin Luther King Jr. as to the best methods to achieve these goals. In 1963, the prospect of "outside" demonstrators forcing rapid change greatly distressed the moderate white ministers. For King and the SCLC, crisis-packed demonstrations provided the empowerment and the publicity the movement needed for fund raising and bargaining. While King advocated an immediate end to segregation and other racial injustices, the white ministers supported the concept of gradualism. Sudden changes in the status quo would cause an upheaval in southern society; the region needed slow, gradual change; time and education, they insisted, not pressure and demonstrations.³

In approaching race relations these Birmingham clergy considered themselves racial moderates. In the South of the 1950s and 1960s, the term moderate implied a sphere of influence between the belligerent white segregationists and the black civil rights activists. In the Birmingham context, the eight moderate white ministers disagreed with segregationist demands of "never" and the integrationist cries of "now" during the quest for racial equality. The belligerence of defiant white southerners and the mass demonstration tactics of the civil rights activists both ultimately led to violence, they supposed.

³ Corley, "The Quest for Racial Harmony," p. 176.

Regardless, many black activists considered moderation a stalling technique. In addition, for King and the SCLC, negotiations with a congenial group of white ministers also failed to provide the needed media coverage and bargaining power. King shrewdly recognized that the ringing of the cash register, not the tolling of the church bell, provided the best route to force a community to deal with the race question. The civil rights leader sought a settlement only after an intense confrontation with the violent proponents of segregation and securing maximum media coverage. Moderation and a slow evolutionary approach eased passions and suppressed the emotion-packed crisis and the sense of urgency. As Wyatt Walker noted in the early 1960s, negotiating with moderates simply nailed the movement to the cross of quiet compromise.⁴

In many ways, this moderate-gradualist approach to race relations reflected the impact of the Cold War on the United States—especially the policy of containment. As U.S. leaders debated the effectiveness of a policy of containing the spread of Communism, white moderates in the South advocated a containment of passions on both sides of the issue. In foreign policy, containment of Communism was the moderate solution: between a policy of massive retaliation and passive acceptance. In the South, racial moderation was the middle

⁴ Robert B. McNeill, God Wills Us Free: The Ordeal of a Southern Minister (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965), p. 199; Reese Cleghorn, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Apostle of Crisis," Saturday Evening Post, June 15, 1963, p. 16.

road between the politics of massive resistance and mass demonstrations. The white moderates sought to contain the violence of the belligerents and violence-provoking demonstrations of the black activists. As Bishop George Murray believed, the "voices of extremity on either side" had never had the right or the only solutions to the racial problems in the South.⁵

Belligerent segregationists also turned to Cold War, anti-Communist rhetoric to intimidate anyone willing to discuss racial matters. As journalist John Egerton wrote, if white supremacy alone failed to keep blacks down and whites united, then the anti-Communist torch "would surely do the trick." Civil rights for African Americans had long been a tenet of the American Communist Party. Accordingly, southern segregationists readily ascribed all civil rights activities to a Communist conspiracy.⁶ Through the years, Martin Luther King was a favorite target of these red-baiting defenders of the status quo.

Moderate white religious leaders were also frequent victims. Belligerents demanded white ministers preach the "Bible-truth" Gospel of segregation; all other interpretations, as Ralph McGill once discovered, were considered Communist. Ministers who refused to preach

⁵ Mobile Press Register, May 26, 1961.

⁶ John Egerton, Speak Now Against The Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 561.

segregation, were condemned for using a "Red" Bible. This rhetoric intimidated many southern ministers and paralyzed many attempts to keep the peace in a church or a community. In Arkansas, governor Orval Faubus believed "left-wingers" and Communists had brainwashed a group of ministers to oppose his segregationist policies.⁷

Birmingham also had a long history of political red-baiting and other anti-Communist activities. When Communist party organizers used the city as a "staging area" in the 1930s, local police introduced a "Red Squad" to intimidate the radicals. The Communist Control Act, a local law, gave Eugene "Bull" Connor freedom to harass suspected revolutionaries (usually those that questioned the racial status quo).⁸

On into the 1950s and early 1960s in Birmingham, Connor consistently used the paranoid political style in whipping up fears of Communist infiltrators spreading strife, dissension, and mistrust in the city's churches. "It may be unfair to fleas, but fleas and Communists are a lot alike," Connor once said, "it doesn't take a whole hide-full to make you mighty uncomfortable." These agents of strife, Connor warned, had infiltrated every phase of American life and were causing "dissension and mistrust in our Christian way of life." One-

⁷ Ralph McGill, The South and the Southerner (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1963), p. 272-77.

⁸ Robert P. Ingalls, "Antiradical Violence in Birmingham During the 1930s," Journal of Southern History, 47 (November 1981): pp. 522-24; Egerton, Speak Now, p. 529.

time Birmingham mayor Art Hanes accused the city's religious leaders of distributing Communist literature and advancing the integrationist cause in local churches. Like many belligerent segregationists, Hanes lumped together moderates, liberal integrationists, and Communists. This rhetoric and more belligerent forms of unethical political persuasion contributed directly to the violence in the streets of Birmingham.⁹

Belligerent rhetoric of hard-line segregationists had persuaded the eight white clergy to band together for the first time in January 1963. During the gubernatorial elections of the previous fall, Alabamians elected George Wallace, the fiery segregationist, to his first term as governor of the state. In January 1963, Wallace stood on the steps of the state capital in Montgomery and took the oath of office near the spot where Jefferson Davis, a hundred years before, had sworn his allegiance as the president of the Confederate States of America. In his inauguration address, Wallace sent a message to all those who dared tread upon the sovereign state of Alabama. The new governor drew his "line in the dust" and tossed the "gauntlet before the feet of

⁹ Connor quote in Nichols, Cities, p. 66; Kyle Haselden, Mandate for White Christians (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966), pp. 47-48; Robert Paul Sessions, "Are Southern Ministers Failing the South?" Saturday Evening Post May 13, 1961: p. 373; Wayne Flynt, "The Ethics of Democratic Persuasion and the Birmingham Crisis," Southern Speech Journal 35 (Fall 1969): pp. 49-50.

tyranny" and proclaimed "segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever."¹⁰

As the state and national media widely publicized Wallace's bellicose rhetoric, Methodist Bishop Nolan Harmon, following a suggestion by his colleague Paul Hardin, invited Alabama's most prestigious white clergy to take a public stand against the inflammatory rhetoric of the new governor. A bishop needed to provide leadership in "more ways than just churchly ones," Harmon had decided. Many of the state's religious leaders had a strong desire to unite and provide "leadership to the forces of justice and peace in Alabama." The group included the eight white ministers who would later compose the Good Friday statement and Reverend Soterios D. Gouvellis of the Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church in Birmingham, Rabbi Eugene Blackschleger of Temple Beth-Or in Montgomery, and J. T. Beale, the secretary-director of the Christian Churches of Alabama. The group met for three hours in Birmingham's old Tutwiler Hotel to discuss the South's rising racial tensions and the inflammatory rhetoric of the new governor. Hoping to persuade white Alabamians against any further massive resistance, Harmon decided the group should issue a public statement appealing for "law and order and

¹⁰ George C. Wallace, "Inaugural Address," in Black, White and Gray: Twenty-one Points of View on the Race Question, ed. Bradford Daniel (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 180.

common sense" and a peaceful compliance to desegregation orders.¹¹

The eleven clergy retired to Harmon's room in the Tutwiler to compose the press release on the bishop's typewriter. Rabbi Milton Grafman sat down at the old manual typewriter and the other clergy gathered around him offering suggestions for the statement. Catholic Bishop Joseph Durick told Grafman to begin the statement with the blessing: in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. "Wait a minute," Grafman responded. "I won't be able to sign that." Embarrassed, Durick realized his mistake and let someone else compose the opening sentence.¹²

The ministers believed that in "these times of tremendous tensions, and change in cherished patterns of life in our beloved Southland," it had become essential for men in positions of responsibility and leadership to express their honest convictions. Alabamians of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths had chosen the signers of this statement to carry a heavy responsibility. Speaking in a spirit of humility, the ministers recognized that they had never possessed all of the answers to solve the complex racial problems in the South. Nevertheless, "our people" expected

¹¹ Harmon, Ninety Years, pp. 297-98; C. C. J. Carpenter et al., "Appeal For Law and Order and Common Sense," Carpenter Papers.

¹² Rabbi Milton L. Grafman, interview by author, tape recording, Birmingham, Alabama, March 1, 1991.

and deserved leadership "from us, and we speak with firm conviction."¹³

Many forthright residents of Alabama opposed the desegregation of the education system in the state. "As southerners," the clergy emphasized, "we understand this." Nevertheless, they believed defiance was neither the "right answer nor the solution" to the race question. Inflammatory and rebellious rhetoric by hard-line segregationists led only to discord, violence, disgrace, and confusion, for the "beloved state" of Alabama. The group directed seven points to the opponents of desegregation [Wallace was never named in the statement]: (1) hatred and violence had no sanction in American religious and political traditions; (2) disagreement over laws and social change should never lead to defiance, anarchy, and subversion; (3) courts and legislatures had the power to review and change laws, but laws could "not be ignored by whims of individuals;" (4) citizens had the right to amend the Constitution or impeach a judge through proper action, but in the meantime, America's way of life depended on obedience to court decisions; (5) no person's freedom was safe, unless everyone's freedom was equally protected; (6) the First Amendment right of free speech must be "preserved and exercised" without fear of recrimination or harassment; (7) by

¹³ Carpenter et al., "Appeal," Carpenter Papers; see Appendix.

being created in God's image, every human deserved respect and all basic rights, privileges, and responsibilities.¹⁴

The situation confronting the South called for earnest prayer, clear thought, understanding love, and courageous action, the ministers concluded. "Thus we call on all people of goodwill to join us in seeking divine guidance as we make our appeal for law and order and common sense." Calling the statement an "interesting illustration of ecumenicity moving rapidly," Episcopal Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter personally delivered a copy of the statement to the editor of the Birmingham Post-Herald to ensure no slip-up in publication.¹⁵

The statement appeared in Birmingham's two daily newspapers on January 17, 1963 and in other newspapers across the country via the wire services over the next week. A Post-Herald editorial writer described the statement as a "creed of the good citizen" and a guide for "thinking and action." In a lengthy piece, an editorial writer for the Birmingham News viewed the ministers' rhetoric with uncertainty. The writer, however, called for other leaders to step forward and speak out. The overwhelming silence of Alabama residents suggested widespread support for Wallace's rhetoric and hard-line segregationist policy. The state needed vocal opposition. Cryptically, however, the News agreed that freedom of speech must be preserved and exercised. Yet, the ministers had erred

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid; Corley, "The Quest," pp. 241-42.

in advocating and expecting a conditional free speech without fear of retaliation or harassment from those on the other side of the issue. Anyone who spoke publicly on racial matters, the News supposed, should anticipate such responses.¹⁶

Alabama's Methodist Christian Advocate enthusiastically embraced the ministers for pointing the way to a peaceful and harmonious Alabama. "Be it ours to follow in the conviction that right shall at last prevail." These eleven white clergy had earned the right through long and effective leadership to serve Alabama as "spiritual guides" with conviction of "profound rightness" and "courage and candor." Several letters to the editor in local newspapers also praised the efforts of the white ministers. One writer believed church leaders and other "men of good will" had remained silent too long. Racists had seized the day and were leading citizens down the "back alley of hate and violence." The writer called on all ministers to follow the lead of the concerned clergymen in Birmingham and cast off "fear and timidity" and lead citizens along the paths of good will.¹⁷

The clergy also received an outpouring of hate-filled letters and late night phone calls from belligerent

¹⁶ Birmingham Post-Herald, January 17, 1963, January 18, 1963; Birmingham News, January 17, 1963, January 20, 1963; the statement also appeared in numerous religious papers throughout the country including The Pilot (Boston) and in various other daily papers like the Jackson Clarion Ledger (Mississippi).

¹⁷ Methodist Christian Advocate (Birmingham), January 29, 1963, February 12, 1963.

segregationists around the state. A Birmingham lawyer branded the "socialist" statement disgusting, cowardly, ill-timed, ill-advised, and inappropriate. The eleven "hypocrites and conformists" needed to keep their mouths shut and stop meddling in race relations. Another writer believed the eleven "frocked politicians" had endorsed the sin of integration. A fundamentalist minister warned Alabamians to ignore the statement and remain unyielding to the whims of Reds, pinks, or "so-called" liberals.¹⁸

While militant segregationists and civil rights activists viewed these white clergy as a monolithic group, actually, on an individual basis, they were a diverse group of theological liberals, social gospel advocates, revivalists, calvinists, and theologians. They were the sons and grandsons of circuit riding preachers, temperance reformers, cantors, southern patriots, and the like. The eight clergy had a variety of backgrounds that shaped their approaches to racial concerns. Individually, generational differences played a key role in their approach to racial moderation. The youngest religious leaders, George Murray, Joseph Durick, Paul Hardin, and Milton Grafman emerged as the most progressive. The two city pastors, Ed Ramage and Earl Stallings, while younger and willing to take bold stands, lacked the institutional support to be strong progressives. Conversely, the oldest ministers,

¹⁸ Grafman to James R. Beard, January 21, 1963, Grafman Papers; Maurice Rogers to Grafman, January 16, 1963, Grafman Papers; undated newspaper clipping, Grafman Papers.

Charles C. J. Carpenter and Nolan Harmon, were the most conservative and advocated the slowest forms of gradual social change.

Carpenter, whom civil rights activist Fred Shuttlesworth characterized as the "great articulate segregationist," epitomized the typical genteel and charming southern religious leader—bound much closer to the status quo than his younger colleagues. A complex individual, with contradictory rhetoric and deeds, Carpenter often appeared to sympathize with both the moderate and the moderate segregationist forces.¹⁹

An intimidating figure, Bishop Charles Colcock Jones Carpenter was a burly, husky six-foot-four and 275 pounds. As an undergraduate at Princeton University, "Chuck" reigned as the Ivy League Heavyweight Wrestling Champ. In an exhibition bout in 1921, Carpenter went the distance with world heavyweight wrestling champion Ed "Strangler" Lewis. After the match ended in a draw, Lewis, a man noted for his vice grip head-lock, advised his young opponent to become a professional wrestler. Carpenter, however, said he preferred to wrestle with theological matters.²⁰

¹⁹ Shuttlesworth, interview; John Lee Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists (Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), p. 204.

²⁰ New York Times, December 5, 1921; Bishop George M. Murray, telephone interview by author, Fairhope, Alabama, February 8, 1991; Reverend Doug Carpenter, interview by author, tape recording, Birmingham, Alabama, January 27, 1991; Alabama Churchman, December 1968.

After completing his theological training at Virginia Theological Seminary in 1926, Carpenter, behind the wheel of his Model T Ford named "Prudence," traveled to Waycross, Georgia to launch his ministry. He made subsequent stops as rector of St. John's Church in Savannah and the Church of the Advent in Birmingham, Alabama. On April 27, 1938, Alabama clergymen and parish representatives elected Carpenter to succeed W. G. McDowell as bishop of Alabama. "Gentlemen," Carpenter told the delegates, "I take this as an order." The young bishop ordered his first bishop's vestments from a company that found his measurements so improbable, they asked the diocesan secretary to verify his size nineteen neck.²¹

As the most conservative of the white ministers, Carpenter struggled for years with the prospect of rapid change in the social order, wishing the South had simply gone along under the old system of segregation for at least a while longer. The bishop sincerely believed Christianity offered no "detailed answer" to the problems created by segregation. "If we make enough Christians," he naively declared, "integration will take care of itself."²²

²¹ Alabama Churchman, May and June 1938; Bishop William George McDowell (1882-1938) had served the diocese from 1922 until his death in 1938; clergymen elected Carpenter on the eleventh ballot and the laity on the seventh ballot; other nominees included the R. Bland Mitchell, James Stoney, R. A. Kirchhoffer, Noble Powell, Willis Clark, and A. R. McKinstry.

²² Carpenter to Will Scarlett, December 12, 1961, Carpenter Papers; New York Times, March 21, 1960.

During his formative years, Carpenter had developed a peculiar attachment to the Old South. Born in 1899, he grew up in the home of his maternal grandfather and namesake Charles Colcock Jones Jr. The young Carpenter spent hours reading the mounds of family letters and books. During the heyday of the New South era in the 1880s and 1890s, Carpenter's grandfather had demanded a return to the agrarian ideal of an earlier era. Described as a "bellicose southern patriot," Jones contended the South's industrialization insulted "the graves of the Confederate dead" and marked an end to "true civilization in favor of barbarism."²³

A generation earlier, Jones's father, the Reverend C. C. Jones Sr., founded several Presbyterian missions to the slaves, including the Dorchester Mission near Savannah (ironically where King planned the Birmingham civil rights campaign). Jones's efforts failed because of his inability to cope with the dilemma of ministering to what he viewed as a morally inferior race. From the beginning of time, he wrote, the black race occupied the "position designed for it in nature and Providence, and no changes and no efforts can ever, on the whole alter it for the better."²⁴

²³ W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Vintage Press, 1941), p. 185.

²⁴ Andrew E. Murray, Presbyterians and the Negro--A History (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1966), p. 58.

One-hundred years later, the Presbyterian minister's great-grandson wrestled with his own American dilemma. Like his ancestors, Bishop Carpenter grappled with the rapid changes forced upon his "beloved" South. Carpenter deplored racial discrimination, his assistant, Bishop Coadjutor George Murray maintained, but at the same time he believed segregation had worked well. Carpenter's stand on civil rights issues reflected this contradictory view, an attitude common among many moderates and moderate segregationists of his generation. As racial tensions mounted in the South, the Episcopal leader advocated exploring only "ultra-gradual" avenues of change. Carpenter consistently spoke of "tremendous progress" in race relations in Alabama, but he conversely opposed any measure that would make rapid improvements. The bishop imagined gradual solutions for what he called "opportunities" rather than problems.²⁵

Early in the modern civil rights era, Carpenter emerged as the most widely-publicized, outspoken moderate critic of civil disobedience in Alabama. During the 1950s, as blacks throughout the South organized to combat segregation, many southern whites initiated a program of massive resistance to desegregation. Carpenter believed that the boycott, as well

²⁵ Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity, p. 204; Bishop George Murray, telephone interview by author, Fairhope, Alabama, March 1, 1991; Father Francis X. Walter, interview by author, tape recording, Birmingham, Alabama, March 13, 1991; Peggy Rupp, interview by author, tape recording, Birmingham, Alabama, February 1, 1991.

as the resistance of the White Citizens Councils, damaged what he viewed as the South's long tradition of "amiable and harmonious" race relations. The groups caused serious trouble by creating tension and troublesome conditions. Carpenter loathed the actions and civil disobedience of both the nonviolent civil rights activists and the often violent white resisters.²⁶

As tensions mounted in the mid-1950s, Carpenter and the Interracial Committee of the Jefferson County Coordinating Council issued a statement calling for "law and order" in racial matters. The council was formed in 1950 to improve interracial understanding and relations in Jefferson County and Birmingham. The group called upon all Alabamians to remain peaceful, avoid violence, and not allow all of the racial "progress" of the last century to be "swept away in the resentment and fury of real or imagined wrong."²⁷ It seemed that Carpenter and the committee believed muted dialogue of interracial meetings constituted tremendous progress in the segregated South.

Angry whites, however, harassed and threatened Carpenter following the publicized statement. To the belligerent whites, Carpenter had committed racial treason. One citizen condemned the bishop for compromising southern "Anglo-Saxon

²⁶ Alabama Churchman, May 1956.

²⁷ Coordinating Council of Social Forces Papers, BPLDAM, Birmingham, Alabama; Carpenter served as chairman from 1951-54 and remained an active member until 1956.

supremacy" by serving on a committee with blacks and Jews. "May God of heaven take note," he proclaimed, of the moral decay of civilization in the wake of racial progress. Staunch segregationists offered to ride Carpenter out of Alabama on a rail. "Why don't you come on over and try one on for size?" he would tell them. Members of the Ku Klux Klan phoned him late at night and threatened to kill him. Callers always had an open invitation to visit the bishop's office to "talk about it." No one ever showed up to answer his invitation.²⁸

In 1960, as the sit-in movement spread across the South, Bishop Carpenter declared civil disobedience "just another name for lawlessness." Allowing individuals to choose which laws to obey or disobey, was like "playing with dynamite," contended Carpenter, and led to confusion, and there was "too much of that already." The bishop firmly believed such tactics provided nothing productive or good for race relations in the region. The sit-in movement was "holding up, instead of aiding" black progress.²⁹

A statement declaring support for the sit-in movement and civil disobedience by units of the National Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church further inflamed Carpenter. These Episcopal leaders believed Christian doctrine supported civil

²⁸ Carl Baker to Carpenter, March 14, 1956, Carpenter Papers; Murray, interview, February 8, 1991; Doug Carpenter, interview.

²⁹ Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 371; New York Times, March 21, 1960.

disobedience when laws had degraded individuals. Carpenter, however, rejected these claims. He complained that the document had little value and had only received public attention because of "artificially inflated press propaganda." Carpenter called on all Episcopalians in the Diocese of Alabama to ignore the statement because of the "inadequate presentation" of the region's racial situation. He further asked the national council to repudiate the document.³⁰

One of the authors of the statement, Reverend John B. Morris, contended that the statement was of "value to all Christians of all churches in the present crisis." Morris harshly characterized Carpenter as the "chaplain to the dying order of the Confederacy." Consequently, the national council rejected Carpenter's pleas and upheld the validity of the document.³¹

Carpenter's old friend and colleague, Bishop Will Scarlett of Maine, disagreed adamantly with Carpenter's opinion of the sit-ins. In a letter to Carpenter, Scarlett believed the bishop was not on God's side in denouncing civil disobedience and that his position hurt the church and the country both at home and abroad. He exhorted Carpenter to shed his moderate-gradualist approach and become an active

³⁰ Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 371; Undated newspaper clipping, Carpenter Papers; Carpenter quote in Mobile Register, April 6, 1960.

³¹ Birmingham News, undated clipping, Carpenter Papers; Joel Williams to Carpenter, May 15, 1961, Carpenter Papers.

leader in the fight for civil rights in Alabama. Scarlett saw the "opportunity of a hundred years" for his friend. "This was in line with my suggestion years ago," Scarlett counseled, "that the sight of the great Bishop of Alabama ridden out of his State on a rail because of a courageous and enlightened speech would be one of the greatest events of many years."³²

Responding to Scarlett, Bishop Carpenter noted that his goal was to simply stop "irresponsible publicity," rather than to hinder the quest for equal rights. Carpenter sent Scarlett a copy of the memorandum for inspection adding that the group had attempted to resolve "tension as best we could." Carpenter was certain that Scarlett could appreciate how "we might get a little irritated when irresponsible publicity was suddenly flooded upon us. . . ." Nevertheless, Scarlett still disagreed with Carpenter's opinion of the sit-in movement. Those who had "quietly and nonviolently" occupied segregated lunch counters were not to blame for the violence, Scarlett maintained. The blame rested upon the mindset which denied them the right to sit at lunch counters and receive service.³³

Later that year Carpenter attended a House of Bishops meeting, where he found most Episcopal bishops expressing skepticism over Alabama's desire to solve its racial problems.

³² Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 742; Scarlett was Reinhold Niebuhr's best friend; Will Scarlett to Carpenter, July 22, 1960, Carpenter Papers.

³³ Carpenter to Will Scarlett, October 6, 1960, Carpenter Papers; Will Scarlett to Carpenter, n.d., Carpenter Papers.

While Carpenter attempted to assure his colleagues of the state's move toward progress, most of the Episcopal leaders scoffed and dismissed the bishop's claims. Whenever he rose to speak, he found his audience expecting him to "give the rebel yell, wave the Confederate flag and sing Dixie," Carpenter supposed.³⁴

By 1961, the entire nation witnessed the brutality of Birmingham's belligerent segregationists and the hand-wringing frustration of the city's moderates and moderate segregationists. Carpenter and several other Birmingham leaders and citizens, both black and white, agreed to discuss the city's race relations on a nationally televised CBS news program entitled, "Who Speaks For Birmingham?" On March 6 the CBS crew filmed an interview with Bishop Carpenter in Birmingham for a program to be aired two months later. By that time the situation in Birmingham had taken a violent turn.

On Mother's Day, May 14, while Carpenter addressed a meeting of Episcopal churchmen, a group of Freedom Riders arrived at the Trailways bus terminal in downtown Birmingham. City Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor ordered policeman out of the vicinity as klansmen attacked the riders. CBS newsman Howard K. Smith, host of "Who Speaks For Birmingham?," watched as klansmen dragged passengers out of

³⁴ Carpenter to Will Scarlett, December 12, 1961, Carpenter Papers.

the bus and beat them with lead pipes, key rings, and bloody fists. "They knocked one man, a white man, down at my feet," recalled Smith, "and they beat him and kicked him until his face was bloody, red pulp." Almost simultaneously, "as if on signal," the attackers dispersed as the police arrived. Smith watched several klansmen "discussing their achievement of the day," right under Connor's office window. Southern chivalry, Carpenter wrote of the attack, was at a low ebb.³⁵

CBS had scheduled "Who Speaks For Birmingham?" for the following Thursday, May 18. The incident at the terminal became an epilogue to the program. That Thursday night on national television the entire country saw the tremendous problems of a racially divided city. In the interview, CBS Producer David Lowe asked Carpenter if communication existed between "thinking members" of both races. "That's our biggest weakness," he responded. Blacks pushed for complete integration and whites would not consider such terms. The "gradual approach" had been shelved, and much-needed communication was difficult. Local leaders had sincerely endeavored to resolve the racial crisis; however, Birmingham was "in a situation," Carpenter insisted, and "we know it."³⁶

The racial climate in the city continued to deteriorate over the succeeding months. Probably more so than any of the

³⁵ CBS Reports, "Who Speaks For Birmingham," transcript of CBS broadcast, May 18, 1961, Tutwiler Collection; Alabama Churchman, June 1961.

³⁶ Ibid.

eight white clergy, Carpenter struggled with the change forced on the city. Martin Luther King's demonstrations during the Spring of 1963, especially angered Carpenter. He saw King and other civil rights activists as outsiders and pleaded with them to move to Birmingham on a permanent basis. "It would be much more effective than coming and marching and then leaving because then we have got to pick up the pieces," he insisted. The bishop's solutions to racial injustices, however, as with most moderates, offered few immediate changes. "We are having difficult times," he wrote in 1963, "but somehow I'm sure we will find the answers if we work alone [without outside interference] patiently and try to keep our heads."³⁷

An equally passionate advocate of gradualism and calm mediation was the oldest of the white ministers, Methodist Bishop Nolan Harmon Jr. As a result of his formative years, Harmon cherished the peacemaker's role and deplored any controversies from the right or the left. Born in Meridian, Mississippi on July 14, 1892, Nolan Bailey Harmon Jr. (like King) was the son, grandson, and great-grandson of ministers. His father and paternal grandfather were passionate and controversial Methodist ministers and temperance reformers in the South. During Reconstruction, grandfather John Wesley Harmon had left a Methodist pastorate and became the founding editor of a temperance paper, the Southern Organ in New

³⁷ Doug Carpenter, interview; Carpenter to J. P. Mitchell, May 29, 1963, Carpenter Papers.

Orleans. For his views, the elder Harmon survived several mob attacks and two arson attempts at the newspaper building. During the Progressive Era, Bishop Harmon's father, Nolan Bailey Sr., preached against the evils of liquor as the president of the anti-saloon league in San Antonio, Texas. He received numerous threats from the beer-drinking German immigrants and mescal-drinking Mexicans in the frontier town.³⁸

Unlike Martin Luther King, Harmon shied away from this vocal protest tradition within his own family. Witnessing the threats and intimidation from people with aroused passions taught the Methodist bishop to avoid social and political controversies during his ministry.³⁹

Educated at Millsaps College in Mississippi and Emory University in Atlanta, Harmon entered the ministry on a trial basis in 1919 and gained full connection within two years. In 1920, he attended Princeton University just prior to the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy at the Presbyterian seminary. And despite having a New Testament class under the Fundamentalist sage, J. Gresham Machen, Harmon developed a

³⁸ Nolan B. Harmon, Jr., "Prohibition and the Churches Duty," (sermon presented on July 15, 1923), Bishop Nolan B. Harmon Papers, Emory University, Pitts Theological Library Archives and Manuscripts; Harmon, Ninety Years, pp. 16-17.

³⁹ Harmon, "Prohibition and the Churches Duty," Harmon Papers; the fiery anti-liquor rhetoric of his father and grandfather, however, had a tremendous impact on the young Harmon's early ministry; following World War I, he praised the ratification of Eighteenth Amendment, and condemned bootleg activities as a "best bet of the devil."

moderate theological underpinning and often joked that modernists considered him a fundamentalist; and fundamentalists considered him a modernist.⁴⁰

With a master's degree in hand, Harmon served as an itinerant minister and traveled wherever the bishop sent him: as a circuit pastor in small towns, as an editor of the conference paper, and as a pastor of a large church in Roanoke, Virginia.⁴¹ Like many southerners of his generation, Harmon had developed a paternalistic, caretaker view of blacks. In the 1920s, he asked his congregation to provide a good example, because blacks were like children and often imitated the "dominant race." Yet, in direct contradiction, Harmon called segregation a great social chasm, and advocated equal rights for blacks (the rights of "all persons") under the law; and in business, civic affairs, and religion. As with many moderates of his era, Harmon never confronted this inherent contradiction between paternalism and equality.⁴²

Unlike King, when Harmon preached, the message focused on the basics of salvation rather than the "fruit" of the Gospel. For the enlightened Christian, the lessons of citizenship, sobriety, and gravity were self evident and simply followed a

⁴⁰ Harmon, Untitled Sermon (presented on April 27, 1924), Harmon Papers.

⁴¹ Harmon's most noteworthy work came as book editor of the reunified Methodist Church from 1940 to 1956.

⁴² Harmon, Ninety Years, pp. 250-57; Harmon, "Our Duty to the Negro," (sermon presented on August 12, 1928), Harmon Papers.

"lively faith." In the early 1960s, Harmon bristled at the suggestion by professor of religion Samuel S. Hill Jr. that the church had to come to terms with vast cultural changes and not simply continue preaching conversion of the individual, "as though that were enough." The bishop, however, believed redemption was the beginning of relevancy for the church in society and culture. He pointed to Methodist patriarch John Wesley as an example of someone who paid little attention to culture and simply "started out to get people right with God." In time, British culture had to come to terms with a converted people, not vice versa.⁴³

The church, Harmon emphasized, was on a divine mission and would never become a "sociological pressure machine." When confronted with sending a delegate to a conference on safe driving, Harmon believed the church had a more important mission: to get folks ready for eternity, "with or without seat belts." The bishop, however, underscored that he had never called for silence from the pulpits on the important social issues of day—especially the race question. Nevertheless, Harmon believed the church's stand on justice, righteousness, and the "eradication of old evils" remained self evident.⁴⁴

⁴³ Harmon, "Many Churches--One Church" (sermon presented at Washington Street Methodist Church, Columbia, South Carolina, September 20, 1962), Harmon Papers.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

To many, the nagging old evil in the Methodist Church was the Central Jurisdiction, which mandated segregated black conferences and leaders. In 1956, at the General Conference in Minneapolis, Harmon had seconded a motion to allow the segregated black conferences to transfer into white conferences or jurisdictions. The shift into a geographical jurisdiction, however, required a formidable two-thirds majority approval by black and white Methodists at conference and church levels. Although years later Harmon claimed to have relieved the "brooding tension" over the church's segregation issue, the Central Jurisdiction remained a point of conflict until the Methodist's merger with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968. The terms of this unification brought about an end to a separate jurisdiction for blacks.⁴⁵

As the civil rights movement gained strength in the South, Harmon recognized the inequity of the southern racial system. Southern whites had dealt unfairly with blacks, he emphasized in the early 1960s, and God knew the church had failed to end injustice in society. Harmon hoped for peace and justice between persons of all races, but he heartily disapproved of the sudden assault of civil rights demonstrators on southern customs and the "great people" of

⁴⁵ Peter Murray, "The Racial Crisis in the Methodist Church." Methodist History 26 (October 1987): 4-5; Harmon, Ninety Years, pp. 251-53; Nolan B. Harmon, Encyclopedia of World Methodism (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), p. 1712.

the region.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, it seemed quite strange that after decades of recognizing the injustice of segregation in the South, Harmon still advocated more time for change.

The Methodist sage considered Martin Luther King's nonviolent demonstrations militant and antagonistic; no matter how orderly they appeared on the surface. Harmon's opinion of nonviolent direct action never changed. In later years, he still complained that King had simply put on the nonviolent movement for show and heightened racial tensions in the South. Little more than "inflammatory grandstanding," the demonstrations damaged southern race relations through a deliberate and organized effort to inflame an explosive situation. Without these highly visible confrontations, Harmon believed, the demonstrations roused little media interest and public support.⁴⁷

Mass demonstrations violated Harmon's sacred view of law and order. He consistently deplored the violation of the principle by civil rights activists and belligerent segregationists. Squarely in the middle of the issue, he rejected any disregard for federal laws by segregationists; as well as defiance of local segregation ordinances by black activists. No majority had the right to deny any minority the fundamental rights of citizenship, he supposed, and any law that denied these rights was an injustice. Nevertheless, when

⁴⁶ Harmon, statement, n.d., Harmon Papers.

⁴⁷ Harmon, Ninety Years, p. 297.

King advocated breaking a "bad law," this went against the long history of western jurisprudence. Continued agitation and an "excited confrontation" between black activists and white belligerents, Harmon supposed, might win needed legal rights, but at the expense of community civility. The Methodist leader believed a measure of good will was needed to secure good laws and provide a "sure scaffolding" for future racial harmony.⁴⁸ Neither a "vast outside power" (the federal government) nor the "well meaning but misdirected forays of outsiders" (the civil rights movement) would bring about justice and peace between the two races. Justice and peace, Harmon believed, would come only by the "slow, slow, slow process of time." Only the good, upright, and forward-looking people of the region and the nation would bring about a gradualist solution to the racial tensions in the South. These people would be impelled by their "own spirit," not forced by others to do away with inequity and establish what was good. Alluding to the length of time needed, Harmon prayed for God to "give us and our children, or our children's children, the will to see that day."⁴⁹

In 1956, the Methodist Church elected Harmon bishop of the Western North Carolina Conference. Five years later, the death of Bishop Bachman Hodge of Alabama forced Harmon into

⁴⁸ Harmon "The Methodist Church and Race" (paper presented at Race Forum, Charlotte, North Carolina, February 1, 1964), Harmon Papers; Greensboro Daily News, February 2, 1964.

⁴⁹ Harmon, statement, undated, Harmon Papers.

assuming the leadership of part of Hodge's jurisdiction, then covering the entire state of Alabama. After the redrawing of the conference lines, the church selected Harmon to supervise the North Alabama Conference and the bishop of South Carolina, Paul Hardin Jr. to supervise the southern part of the state and the Florida panhandle (Alabama and West Florida Conference). The two circuit flying bishops had to supervise the Alabama conferences as well as their conferences in the Carolinas.⁵⁰

Just a few months earlier in the summer of 1960, Methodist leaders had selected Hardin as the bishop of South Carolina. The church separated South Carolina from Harmon's Western North Carolina Conference and chose Hardin, then pastor of the First Methodist Church in Birmingham. Born November 7, 1903 in Chester, South Carolina, Paul Hardin Jr. had filled the pulpit at First Methodist since 1949. An outspoken, progressive voice in Birmingham's white religious community, Reverend Hardin presented an interesting contrast to the older, straight and narrow Harmon.

During his eleven years in Birmingham, Hardin's sermons frequently provided a swift kick in the seat of the pants for many of his four thousand-member congregation. Similar to King, Hardin placed a strong emphasis on social concerns. He never avoided preaching on controversial subjects (including racial tensions) and believed if a congregation prevented a

⁵⁰ Harmon, Ninety Years, pp. 295-96.

pastor from preaching on such matters, the members had deprived themselves of information and knowledge they painfully needed. In early 1956, Hardin preached on the "Sin of Prejudice." Although the sermon mostly dealt with prejudice in a broad sense, the minister had asked his flock to search their own hearts for racial bigotry. He petitioned the congregation, as Christians, to treat blacks as Jesus would in every circumstance and to imagine what they would do if they lived lives with skin "of the other color." Hardin noted that he always tried to keep these two reasonable considerations in mind in his interracial dealings.⁵¹

In the same series of sermons, Hardin branded those who hated the black race as either "morally ignorant or spiritually ill." He never understood how mature adults harbored hatred of anything or anyone. Hatred deep in the heart was a deadly sin and had no place in the church or at the altar. He explained to this mostly middle- and upper-class congregation that economic fear of blacks had resulted in hatred among less-educated and ignorant whites. He

⁵¹ Paul Hardin, "A Plea for a Militant Church" (sermon, n.d.), Paul Hardin, Jr. Papers, World Methodist Archives, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina (hereafter cited as WMA); Hardin, "The Sin of Prejudice," (sermon presented at the First Methodist Church of Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama, January 29, 1956), Hardin Papers.

sincerely believed that most southerners had been "grossly misrepresented" in their racial attitudes toward blacks.⁵²

Several months later, the Klan abducted a young Birmingham black man, Judge Aaron, castrated him and poured turpentine on the wound to intensify the pain. Hardin condemned the senseless violence from his pulpit (he later claimed he had been the only white minister in the city to do so) and called the "so-called defenders" of the southern way of life, Birmingham's worst enemies. Phone threats began that afternoon and persisted for almost a month, with callers telling the "nigger-loving" preacher to get out of town or he was dead.⁵³

Despite several bold and quite liberal statements from his pulpit, Hardin remained firmly committed to a moderate, gradual approach to race relations. The South would never see the goal of racial equality achieved overnight. The black activist push for immediate integration and the belligerent segregationist cries of never were both unrealistic in the region. "Only by calm, persistent, and consistent efforts

⁵² Hardin, "The Sin of Hating" (sermon presented at the First Methodist Church of Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama, January 15, 1956), Hardin Papers.

⁵³ Corley, "The Quest," p. 136; Paul Hardin, interview by Elliott Wright, April 18, 1980, WMA.

under level-headed, intelligent, and dedicated leadership can true brotherhood become a reality," Hardin believed.⁵⁴

Southern communities desperately needed breathing space for the people of good will to work together for a solution to problems. The presence of "deeply dedicated visitors" attracted extensive national media attention, but Hardin questioned whether their presence made "any contribution to the permanent solution of local problems and the feeling of good-will between local Negroes and whites."⁵⁵

The promotion to the episcopacy in 1960 led Hardin from the prestigious pulpit in Birmingham back to his home state of South Carolina. When he returned to Alabama a few months later, racial tensions had intensified in Birmingham during 1961 and both Hardin and Harmon had to spend increasing amounts of time in their troubled conferences in the Deep South.

Within the Catholic Church, a difference of opinion over the race question divided the state's two bishops. Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Aloysius Durick served as the point man in Birmingham for Archbishop Thomas Joseph Toolen of the Mobile-Birmingham Diocese (based in Mobile). As one keen observer of black-white relations in the region noted, the elderly Toolen was apparently unwilling to "come to grips" with the race

⁵⁴ Hardin, "Race and the Methodist Church--The Southeastern Jurisdiction," (report presented to the Council of Bishops, April 1965), Hardin Papers.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

problem, while Durick appeared much more progressive. Durick recognized that it was much more than a simple disagreement. "It goes much deeper," he told Toolen. "Me and my generation will have to face up to the question and you and your generation will not. You're past that age."⁵⁶

Born in Dayton, Tennessee on October 13, 1914, Durick grew up in Bessemer, Alabama (just west of Birmingham), during the height of anti-Catholic violence in the state (including the murder of a Birmingham priest by a Methodist minister in 1921).⁵⁷ These images of bigotry toward Catholics helped Durick develop a sympathetic perspective in confronting racial injustice.

Early in his career, Durick worked as a street preacher and an open-air revivalist in staunchly anti-Catholic central and northern Alabama. A one-time professional jazz saxophone player, Durick had developed a charismatic stage presence that served him well during these efforts. With a strange combination of Fulton Sheen evangelism and Billy Sunday zeal,

⁵⁶ Benjamin Muse, Confidential Memorandum: "Dangerous Situation in Birmingham, General Observations," January 11, 1962, Southern Regional Council Papers, BPLDAM; Bishop Joseph A. Durick, interview by author, tape recording, Bessemer, Alabama, February 21, 1992; Bishop Joseph A. Durick, interview by author, tape recording, Bessemer, Alabama, May 8, 1992.

⁵⁷ Durick's mother had traveled to Dayton shortly before his birth to stay with relatives and escape the dirt and grime of Bessemer; Father James E. Coyle, pastor of St. Paul's Catholic Church in Birmingham had been shot to death by the Reverend E. R. Stephenson; Hugo Black later acted as his defense council and won an acquittal; Wayne Flynt, "Religion in the Urban South: The Divided Religious Mind of Birmingham, 1900-1930" Alabama Review 30 (April 1977): 108-34.

Durick and his "North Alabama Mission Band" traveled town-to-town in an old Ford station wagon with trailer in tow, having to stop often for a dose of water to cool an ailing radiator. It seemed an ideal assignment for Durick, once a youngster with a saxophone, now preaching from a make-shift pulpit and playing "non-heretical" Protestant revival standards ("Blessed Assurance," "Oh, What a Friend We Have In Jesus," "Old Rugged Cross") on a rudimentary, battery-operated organ. Durick soon learned the informal language of Protestantism and developed an imaginative, down-home style of preaching—not unlike many of the Baptist and Pentecostal evangelists in the region.⁵⁸

Durick's missionary efforts endeavored to convert non-Catholics, encourage "fallen-away" Catholics (those attending Protestant churches) to return to the fold, and help break down bigotry among the Protestant population in the South. "If I had been taught the things you had been led to believe about the Catholic Church," Durick often told Protestants, "I would hate it too." Most Protestant southerners looked upon the strange visitors with contempt. Klan activists tried to intimidate the priests with anti-Catholic banners posted near revival meetings. Threats of violence, however, never materialized. Arriving in a community, the priests canvassed each neighborhood door-to-door to promote interest in the revivals. These evangelistic efforts, although uncommon among

⁵⁸ "Outdoor Apostolate Instructional Pamphlet," n.d., Bishop Joseph A. Durick Papers, copies in possession of author.

Catholics, matched Durick's personality and religious convictions. "I was always anxious," Durick once said. "I believe very firmly in what I believe. I would be willing to die for it. That's how much I believe in it."⁵⁹

Durick's racial attitude during his formative years and through the 1950s was typical of many Americans of the time period. Like most whites in the South, the Catholic leader passively accepted segregation as the natural order of society. With an aura of timelessness to the institution, Durick saw segregation as merely "just kind of the way of life we had." The bishop admitted that he and most white southerners had an almost instinctive, take-for-granted attitude and never recognized the injustice of segregation. Whites held a widespread belief that blacks were treated honorably (as long as they remained in their place).⁶⁰

As the injustices of segregation became more apparent to Durick, he publicly proclaimed segregation a great social and moral evil. Regardless, the bishop, in direct contrast to King, believed the quest for racial equality demanded time. The moderate religious leaders in the region were attempting

⁵⁹ Durick, "Results of Street Preaching," Durick Papers; Catholic Week, September 21, 1945; Durick, interview, May 8, 1992; Durick, interview, February 21, 1992; Durick, "Street Preaching Outline," Durick Papers; in 1956, Durick preached five nights at a revival and his sermons included: "The Purpose in Life," "Life of Jesus," "The Church," "Two Great Powers," and "Church and Bible."

⁶⁰ Durick, interview, February 21, 1992; Durick, interview, May 8, 1992.

to break down a long-standing way of life and never expected to transform the mind of the South overnight. Throughout the racial crisis in Birmingham, Durick encouraged Alabamians to gradually cross over to a new social order and transcend "emotion-packed demonstrations" and violent confrontations. Using a racial crisis to provide an immediate and reckless transformation of an "immoral social order" was illogical and harmed the gradualist cause that had worked "ever so many years," Durick wrote. The church had not failed with the gradual approach and the leaders were not "going to abandon that way in order to seize upon something more dramatic," the bishop emphasized.⁶¹

Even urging a gradual, moderate transformation in southern society was a courageous stand for the eight white ministers to make both individually and collectively, Rabbi Milton Grafman believed. "The situation was tense," he later recalled. "It was not an easy time to speak out." During much of the 1950s and 1960s, the national media coverage of Birmingham had focused mostly on the extremist rhetoric of the belligerent segregationists. The time had come, Grafman emphasized, for the public to understand that a "great number" of moderates lived and worked in the Magic City. Not every white resident of Alabama was a Bull Connor or a George Wallace, the rabbi advised the media, so "stop holding us up

⁶¹ Durick, untitled public speech, 1963, Durick papers; Durick, background notes for public statement issued May 25, 1963, Durick Papers; Catholic Week, May 31, 1963.

to shame and contempt throughout the world." At the same time, Grafman urged silent moderates and liberals in his congregation to take a stand. "I'm not asking you to go out and lead a crusade," he explained in 1963, but for "heaven's sake can't you at least do what I've done and . . . join with Christians" to provide a peaceful change in the status quo?⁶²

Born in Washington, D.C., on April 21, 1907 and raised in Pennsylvania, Grafman had developed a strong commitment to justice as a young high school student. In his 1924 yearbook he emphasized his sincere desire to see justice prevail and looked to a future career to attain this goal: either as a lawyer or a rabbi. The Jewish Holocaust of the 1930s and 1940s emerged as a source of "tremendous personal anguish" for Grafman and reenforced his resolve to seek justice. During a trip to Europe in the fall of 1938, he wrote to his family in America that Nazi cruelty was "beyond description" and he feared that no one would believe his stories once he returned home. "Nothing they would do," he wrote, "would now come as a surprise. . . ."⁶³

In addition to this unwavering commitment to justice, Grafman had a deep love of Judaism that helped refine his

⁶² Grafman, interview, March 1, 1991; Grafman to Max Mazer, January 24, 1963, Grafman Papers; Grafman, Rosh Hashanah Sermon (sermon presented at Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, Alabama, September 19, 1963), tape recording in possession of author.

⁶³ "1924 Firth Avenue High School Yearbook, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," in possession of Stephen Grafman; Grafman quote in Stephen W. Grafman, letter to author, October 3, 1995.

response to race relations. During Grafman's childhood, his father, Reuben, served as a chazzan or cantor: the leader of the musical part of a Jewish religious service. Reuben Grafman began teaching Hebrew to Milton at the age of three and spent every Saturday afternoon with his son discussing the Bible, the Talmud, and Jewish philosophy. "I was naturally oriented toward Judaism," the younger Grafman once said, "and becoming a rabbi was perhaps a natural thing. . . ." ⁶⁴

Educated at the University of Cincinnati and Hebrew Union College, Grafman was ordained a rabbi in 1933. That same year he accepted his first full-time position at Temple Adath Israel in Lexington, Kentucky. The rabbi would spend the next sixty-two years working and living in the South. Like other southern religious minorities, Grafman and other Jews adapted to life in the region and enjoyed congenial relations with his Protestant religious neighbors. As one observer of southern religion noted, the region's Jewish population were "quintessential southerners." Despite the contrast in religious customs, Jews readily assimilated into the routines and social customs of their adopted home. ⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Grafman, letter to author; Milton Grafman, interview by Birmingham Public Library, tape recording, August 19, 1977, BPLDAM.

⁶⁵ Stephen Grafman, letter to author; David E. Harrell, "Pluralism, Catholics, Jews, and Sectarians" in Religion in the South, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), pp. 61-62; Harrell further emphasized that most historians have ignored the southern Jewish experience because their "life-style solely resembled that of their gentile neighbors."

During the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, Grafman was the most decisive advocate of the moderate-gradual approach to racial justice among the eight clergy. In plotting a moderate course, he considered himself trapped between the bigots on the right and the "bigoted liberals" on the left. The rabbi vigorously opposed "whipping up hatred" against blacks and pleaded with supporters of civil rights to stop inciting malice against those whites trying to help. Civil rights activists and the national press had created a "Roman Circus" atmosphere in Birmingham, the rabbi maintained, and he found this sickening. Grafman firmly believed the movement and the media were fostering a national hatred of Birmingham throughout the country, while the white ministers were fighting to "whip up love" in the community.⁶⁶

One Birmingham minister described Rabbi Milton Grafman as an Old Testament prophet with tireless energy, keen insight, and the courage to stand for justice and righteousness. In many ways, Grafman identified with the forsaken Biblical prophets traveling a lonely road through a period of strife and unrest. He walked this secluded path, he once told his congregation, because he wanted justice and equality for blacks in the South, as well as fairness and decency for whites. Old Testament prophets Amos, Jeremiah, and Hosea

⁶⁶ Grafman, notes to untitled speech (presented at the annual meeting of the Reform Jewish congregation, Columbus, Ohio, March 22, 1964), Grafman Papers; Grafman, Rosh Hashanah Sermon.

never hid from controversial issues or cowered in fear of losing "fringe benefits" or social prestige. "They went where the action was," the rabbi said. Nevertheless, Rabbi Grafman traveled his lonely road to racial equality at a gradual, moderate pace.⁶⁷

Grafman told critics he preferred to live and work in Birmingham during the racial turmoil and not just observe the crisis from the safety of some northern synagogue. The rabbi remained critical of Northerners who flew South for one day to be a hero and then retreated to shelter across the Mason-Dixon line. While he described segregation in the South as dismal, obstinate, and stupid, Grafman blasted the revolting hypocrisy of the racial climate in the North. He believed the South had openly acknowledged the preference for segregation, while the North never admitted to de facto segregation. He often borrowed a quip from Dr. Lucius Pitts, president of Birmingham's historically black Miles College, to explain the difference in the two regions: Southern politicians gave blacks rat poison and said it was rat poison; while their northern counterparts handed blacks rat poison and called it cake.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Dr. Lamar Jackson quote in Mark H. Elovitz, A Century of Jewish Life in Dixie: The Birmingham Experience (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974), p. 151; Grafman, Rosh Hashanah Sermon; Grafman, interview, August 19, 1977.

⁶⁸ Grafman, notes, n.d., Grafman Papers.

Grafman was thirty-four years old when he arrived in Birmingham on December 8, 1941 to assume the rabbinate of Temple Emanu-El. The Temple had a long history of social activism and interfaith cooperation under the leadership of Grafman's predecessor, Rabbi Morris Newfield (who served the temple from 1895 to 1940). Despite widespread Klan activity in Central Alabama, the Jews of Temple Emanu-El maintained a close bond with many Christian civic and religious leaders. Over the years, splinter congregations from Presbyterian, Southern Baptist, Congregational, and Unitarian churches held services in the Temple.⁶⁹

Consistently seeking to improve Christian and Jewish relations, Rabbi Grafman founded and promoted an annual Institute on Judaism for Christian Clergy to "wipe away prejudice, intolerance, and hatred with knowledge." The rabbi's efforts helped to convince the Protestant Pastors Union to change their name to the Ministers Association of Greater Birmingham and the group in turn invited Grafman to join.⁷⁰

The rabbi recognized the precarious situation most white Christian ministers faced in Birmingham. If they spoke out on racial matters, even with moderate overtures, they immediately

⁶⁹ Elovitz, A Century of Jewish Life and Mark Cowett, Birmingham's Rabbi: Morris Newfield and Alabama, 1895-1940 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986).

⁷⁰ Elovitz, A Century of Jewish Life, p. 153; Stephen Grafman, letter to author.

had a "black mark against them," Grafman believed, and they were finished ministering in the South. Grafman, however, maintained a strong position at Temple Emanu-El and never feared addressing controversial subjects in the Synagogue; usually prefacing remarks with, "you're not going to like what I'm going to say." Nevertheless, Grafman admitted that he never would have signed his name to the ministers' statements alone. But by working together with other clergy, the rabbi believed he was advancing racial justice, while protecting his congregation and maintaining a measure of security for himself.⁷¹

Episcopal Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter saw teamwork as an important part of his relationship with his right-hand assistant, George Mosely Murray. The pair made a "good team," the senior bishop used to say, because Carpenter was conservative enough to keep the laymen content and Murray was liberal enough to keep the young clergy happy. "Maybe we'll muddle through this [racial] crisis on that basis," Carpenter told Murray.⁷²

Murray was the youngest of the white ministers and the most progressive of the moderates. Born in 1919, Murray was a distinguished gentleman with an eloquent, proper speaking voice (a voice once described as sounding like "crystal when it's tapped"), and a fervent commitment to the social gospel

⁷¹ Grafman, interview, March 1, 1991.

⁷² Murray, interview, February 8, 1991.

(not unlike King). The church had to become applicable to all of life or it simply existed as a meaningless institution, Murray told a group of Episcopal laymen in 1961. He believed the church had a duty to alleviate social ills, as well as to win souls.⁷³

Murray cultivated this liberal theological and social commitment while a seminarian at Virginia Theological Seminary in the late 1940s. The ideas he learned in seminary also had a tremendous impact on his racial attitudes. Growing up in Hueytown, Alabama (just west of Birmingham) in the 1920s and 1930s, Murray accepted segregation as the natural order of society. In seminary, Murray began seeing mankind as mankind and the love of God for everyone, regardless of color. This totally convinced Murray that segregation, discrimination, and mistreatment of blacks was a sin and he needed to work personally towards changes in the status quo. Yet, Murray never advocated immediate integration. "I am not an integrationist," he once explained, "nor am I a segregationist. I am a desegregationist." Accordingly, Murray emphasized the gradualist approach in race relations.⁷⁴

In the fall of 1961, leaders in the newly formed Episcopal Society of Cultural and Racial Unity planned a Prayer Pilgrimage (in the spirit of the Freedom Rides) through

⁷³ Alabama Churchman, March 1969; Mobile Press-Register, May 26, 1961; Murray, interview, February 8, 1991.

⁷⁴ Murray, interview, March 1, 1991.

the Deep South to "show concern" for segregated educational institutions operated by the Episcopal Church. The group, led by an Episcopal minister, John B. Morris, planned to stop in Birmingham to promote "greater understanding" between Episcopal clergy.⁷⁵

When Murray and Bishop Carpenter refused to cooperate, Morris accused the church leaders of blocking open communications. Murray, however, believed Morris, a staunch civil rights activist, had chosen the one method (direct action) which made real communication impossible. The best approach to the racial situation was through a "lawful and orderly" process not through a campaign to cause embarrassment and "confusing publicity." The bishop believed Morris and his group were attempting to drive a "wedge of mistrust" between the bishops and their clergy. Murray asked Morris if he wanted to strengthen the church for people to find their way or to create dissension. The activists were undermining the work of those who had a "heavy responsibility" and had worked "creatively and not destructively" to further racial progress. While Murray hoped for southern racial equality one day, he strongly opposed the activists' methods and deplored their efforts as harmful to the church's ministry. The only clear goal Morris had in making the pilgrimage was to obtain publicity; he was confused about any other purposes, Murray

⁷⁵ John Morris to Murray and Carpenter, September 2, 1961, Carpenter Papers.

wrote. The bishop urged Morris to submit to church leadership and work with people of "various convictions on the subject within a framework of responsibility, rather than taking pot shots from outside."⁷⁶

Murray also faced a tense confrontation with the Episcopal governing body over the issue of civil disobedience. While Murray constantly advocated gradual change and the obedience to all laws (especially the Brown decision), the House of Bishops passed a resolution calling on citizens to disobey local segregation laws. In a speech before the group, Murray pointed out that the measure undercut efforts moderate southern leaders had been making. The bishops of the Deep South had appealed to people to obey the law, because the court decisions and Congressional laws were moving in the right direction. "And now here you are, all you northern bishops saying disobey the law," Murray proclaimed. "If you're not careful your going to drive the South out of the church." Northern church leaders treated the southern bishop as if he was a "Klansman who had just left his sheet in the hotel room" while he came to the meeting.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid. Murray and Carpenter to John Morris, August 30, 1961, Carpenter Papers; Murray to John Morris, September 6, 1961, Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU) Papers. Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., Archives, Atlanta, Georgia (hereafter cited as King Center).

⁷⁷ Murray, interview, February 8, 1991.

Murray considered this portrait somewhat amusing, since many belligerent Alabama segregationists thought him a wide-eyed liberal, bent on "burning the stars and stripes and banishing motherhood." He feared the wrath of these hostile whites and soon took several personal precautions by removing his boldly lettered name from his shiny, black mailbox and relocating his children's beds to the center of the house to protect them from a bomb blast.⁷⁸

While pressure from belligerents continued to intensify in Birmingham, U.S. District Judge Hobart H. Grooms (a leader in the First Baptist Church) quickened the pace of desegregation in 1961 by ordering all of the city's recreational facilities integrated by January 15, 1962. Rather than integrating, the hard-line city commissioners (Bull Connor, Art Hanes, and Jabo Waggoner) ordered all facilities closed. The city's action outraged and united white moderates in Birmingham and gave Bishop Murray a new sense of resolve in confronting racial injustice.⁷⁹

The Southern Regional Council, a group dedicated to open communication between races, dispatched representative

⁷⁸ Alabama Churchman, March 1969; Terry Barr, "Rabbi Grafman and Birmingham's Civil Rights Era" (paper presented at symposium on Southern Rabbis' Involvement in Black Civil Rights, Memphis, Tennessee, April 1995), p. 29.

⁷⁹ "More Race Pressure on Business," Business Week, May 12, 1962, pp. 130, 132; Memorandum by Benjamin Muse, "Dangerous Situation in Birmingham: General Observations," January 11, 1962, Southern Regional Council Papers; Corley, "The Quest," pp. 223-31.

Benjamin Muse to observe the situation and the "sudden awakening" of moderate leadership in Birmingham. In no other southern community had Muse seen "such a general mobilization of community leadership on the moderate side of a segregation issue as had occurred during the past two months in Birmingham." The SRC representative also commended Bishop Murray's liberal attitude in combatting racial prejudice. Muse, however, believed the bishop coadjutor remained critical of those who wished to "go too fast." In a conversation with Muse, Murray said that he had to move gradually to avert an "aggressive counter-movement" by Episcopal segregationists.⁸⁰

During Holy Week 1962, Murray addressed the problems facing Birmingham in a series of services at the Church of the Advent in downtown. The bishop wondered what Jesus would see in Birmingham if he looked across the valley from atop Red Mountain. Murray believed his Savior would observe "little children offended and puzzled" in Birmingham. The bishop had a difficult time explaining to his own children why city officials had closed the public parks and the Kiddieland amusement center rather than letting the black children share equally in the enjoyment. "They [Murray's children] just do not understand," Murray said. Foreshadowing King's rhetoric in the *Letter*, Murray believed he had gained a new

⁸⁰ Muse, "Dangerous Situation," January 11, 1962; Memorandum by Benjamin Muse, "Visit to Birmingham--September 22-24 and Alabama Plans," September 30, 1960, Southern Regional Council Papers; Corley, "The Quest," p. 177.

understanding of the struggle black families faced in a segregated society. How does a black family explain to their little child why they "couldn't stop and let him go on some rides" at Kiddieland. "Jesus truly offended in a little child!" Murray emphasized. "Can we not see where this path of retaliation and meanness leads us?"⁸¹

Several parishioners at the Church of the Advent expressed shock and outrage over Murray's comments. The bishop called their reaction "a sad commentary on our situation" in Birmingham; Christian brothers and sisters unable to discuss the "most burning and troublesome issue of our time." Many moderates in the city had become "so suppressed" that they were unable to seek a solution. Murray confessed he had found "little grace" in helping racial progress occur in Birmingham. Nevertheless, he pleaded for Alabama Episcopalians to "come out of our shells" in order to understand one another "openly and honestly and in Christian love."⁸²

Murray called for a new atmosphere of open and direct communication between blacks and whites; an environment where all Birmingham citizens had the opportunity to express honest convictions without being branded a Communist and without being harassed by anonymous letters and telephone calls. People of different opinions and different

⁸¹ Murray, untitled Holy Week sermons, 1962, Bishop George Murray Papers, copies in possession of author.

⁸² Ibid.

racess needed a place to sit down calmly and seek real solutions based on a "searching after the will of God," Murray said. Some believed these discussions had no place in the church. The bishop disagreed. Jesus spent time in the temple in "creative controversy," discussing the important social issues of the time. "I believe we would not accuse him of any wrong-doing," Murray added. An exemplary life was much better than exemplary talk, the bishop believed. "Those things which we learn from God by honest seeking will be most effectively shown forth by the way we as a church actually practice them," Murray wrote.⁸³

This open communication, however, needed to exist among local residents, and the church offered the perfect setting for such negotiations. Murray often wondered if groups in opposition really attempted to understand one another. He believed the church needed to provide a "reconciling function" and a place for these groups to come together and talk. During 1962 and 1963, Bishop Murray hosted and moderated several interracial meetings between local business, religious, and civic leaders at the diocese headquarters in downtown Birmingham. Miles College President L. H. Pitts praised the meetings for showing that white men of goodwill in Birmingham were willing to "approach our problems with saneness." During the demonstrations in the spring of 1963, Murray pleaded with Martin Luther King to come to these

⁸³ Ibid. Alabama Churchman, September 1960.

gatherings to discuss the Birmingham crisis. King, however, never participated (despite several promises to do so). Instead, Andrew Young, Fred Shuttlesworth and others represented King and the SCLC. Murray remembered a presumptuous Shuttlesworth telling them that he welcomed the support of the interracial gathering, but "any other ideas" regarding compromise were out of the question.⁸⁴

Like Grafman and the other white minsters, Murray detested non-Birmingham residents (like King) coming to town for a few weeks, criticizing, confronting, and then going elsewhere. The bishop believed Alabama needed people to move to the state to bridge gaps between the races and build relationships. During the civil rights protests, Murray offered a position (including outstanding pay and housing allowances) to a northern priest participating in the demonstrations. "Come down here and work with us," Murray entreated. The young priest refused. "Bishop you got me," he confessed. Murray then asked the priest to stop complaining about the South and the "sorry outfit" governing the Episcopal church in Alabama. "You know I'm going back [North] and I don't think I'm going to say anything about the South," the young priest told Murray. "I think I'm going to talk to my parishioners about their own sins."⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Alabama Churchman, March 1969; L. H. Pitts to Grafman, February 22, 1962, Grafman Papers; Murray interview, February 8, 1991.

⁸⁵ Murray, interview, March 1, 1991.

In most areas of the South, belligerent segregationists concluded that the work of moderate clergy in racial matters was an unpardonable sin. During the 1950s and 1960s, clergymen united and issued public statements in many of the South's urban centers, including Dallas, Baton Rouge, Montgomery, Chattanooga, Atlanta, Little Rock, Richmond, and Miami. By working collectively, these ministerial groups hoped to avoid a severe backlash from belligerents in their churches and in the community. Throughout the South, however, church-going segregationists used harsh, Spanish Inquisition-like reprisals to purge a pastor from a local church. One Alabama Methodist churchgoer gruffly advised moderate ministers to hit the "well paved roads" heading north. Radicals repeatedly urged whipping "weak-kneed preachers" into line by withholding tithes and sabotaging the pastor's program with steady persecution. As a Methodist layman recommended: "If your preacher doesn't preach segregation from his pulpit, you cut his salary to a dollar a year and sell his parsonage."⁸⁶

Many ministers remained silent, preserving their ministry in the community, while others sought transfers. Church leadership appeared "woefully inadequate" where belligerent segregationists ruled a congregation. Journalist Ralph McGill

⁸⁶ Ralph McGill, The South and the Southerner (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), pp. 273-78; Kenneth K. Bailey, Southern White Protestantism in the 20th Century (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 149-51; Corley, "The Quest," p. 182.

compared the careers of southern white ministers to football coaches and baseball managers. They were an expendable group when their support failed, or hard core members plotted to repudiate the so-called liberal pastor. Some ministers lost pulpits simply by stating publicly that the race problem was a "Christian responsibility" or by pleading for moderation (to some moderation was synonymous with integration). Few moderate clergyman could successfully defend their position on their own. Even united, many ministers in Baptist and Presbyterian churches were "run out of town on a rail" because they lacked the protection and support of a bishop.⁸⁷

As leaders in an episcopal form of church polity (those governed by bishops), Harmon, Hardin, Durick, Carpenter, and Murray took little risk in speaking out. Neither did Rabbi Grafman, who had solid support from his congregation at Temple Emanu-El. Despite constant harassment, threats, and criticism, the bishops and the rabbi never feared losing their jobs or their livelihood. On the other hand, Ed Ramage remained in a rather vulnerable position as the senior pastor at First Presbyterian. Most Presbyterian churches had a representative form of church administration (led and governed by a group of Elders elected by the congregation). While this

⁸⁷ Brooks Hays, A Southern Moderate Speaks (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), pp. 211-12; McGill, The South and the Southerner, p. 276; Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity, p. 197; Samuel Southard, "Are Southern Churches Silent? Christian Century, 80 (November 20, 1963): 1430; Frank E. Smith, Look Away From Dixie (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 80.

removed direct threats from the congregation, Ramage was, nonetheless, at the mercy of several outspoken segregationist Elders. At First Baptist, Pastor Earl Stallings was completely unprotected from hostile segregationists. As a Southern Baptist in a congregational form of church government (ruled by the congregation), Stallings had little sanctuary or recourse.

The drama of the civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham affected the pastors of these two large downtown congregations more directly than the other white ministers. As part of the overall plan for obtaining media coverage, the SCLC targeted Stallings's First Baptist and Ramage's First Presbyterian for black visitors on Easter Sunday morning, April 14, 1963 (and for several weeks there after). The prospect of blacks violating the social customs of a local church had the reaction King and the SCLC had hoped for: bringing tensions to the surface and opening wounds. These uncommon visitors inflamed belligerents in both churches and brought tremendous pressure and threats upon Stallings and Ramage. That bright, cool, spring, Easter morning at First Baptist Church, James Earl Stallings was preparing to preach "A Message For This Day," the opening sermon in a week long revival. A native of North Carolina, Stallings had filled the pulpit at First Baptist since January 1962 with an intense, evangelistic, and missionary fervor. Seeking a shepherding relationship with his flock, the new pastor spent his first

three months personally visiting every member and regular visitor in the large congregation.⁸⁸

Built in 1903, the First Baptist Church building at Sixth Avenue and Twenty-second Street resembled a Medieval fortress—with roughly chiseled Bedford stone and stark Moorish spirals—rather than a house of worship. In the 1920s, future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black had played an active role as a deacon and the teacher of the "Cosmopolitan Baraca Men's Sunday School Class." The largest and most prestigious Southern Baptist congregation in the city, the church emerged as a prized target for the SCLC publicity campaign.⁸⁹

Since 1954, the church maintained an open door policy for any black visitors. Then-pastor J. T. Ford had initiated the action following the Brown decision and each succeeding pastor (T. Sloane Guy, Grady C. Cothen, and Earl Stallings) reaffirmed the church's position on black visitors. Only the week before, the board of deacons had unanimously confirmed the church policy. Of course the issue remained a moot point as long as blacks never attended church services.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ First Baptist Church Birmingham, Alabama, "The Messenger" (April 11, 1963), John Chandler Papers, copies in possession of author.

⁸⁹ Undated newspaper clipping, Chandler Papers; "Into Our Second Century, 1872-1982," Newspaper Clipping Files, Tutwiler Collection.

⁹⁰ First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Church Conference and Deacon Minutes, January 4, 1950 to December 8, 1954, January 12, 1955 to September 15, 1965, Special Collections

A mass of reporters joined the large Easter Sunday crowd, awaiting the unique guests. As the 10:55 a.m. service drew near, civil rights activist Andrew Young, accompanied by two black women, entered the crowded sanctuary and were seated. Young handed one of the ushers a form letter explaining the demonstrators' motives. They had come to First Baptist on the day of resurrection to seek a new life together with "our separated brothers and sisters." Some called this act a "kneel-in," but the civil rights activists simply hoped to worship in a house of prayer "for all people." Almost immediately, nearly seventy white worshipers left in protest. Stallings later commented that these segregationists "did not characterize the way most of us felt about welcoming them to our worship."⁹¹

During the offertory, the head warden at the Birmingham Jail, Bob Austin handed Young the offering plate. Young placed an offering envelope in the plate (one church leader claimed the envelope was empty and inscribed words "thank you for an almost Christian reception" scrawled on the outside). Following the service, church members gathered in the streets alongside several reporters and photographers to observe the church's visitors. Stallings warmly greeted Young and his group on the steps of the church, and his smiling gesture

Department, Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama; "Excerpts From Deacons' Meetings," Chandler Papers.

⁹¹ Letter, Chandler Papers; Earl Stallings, letter to the author, July 7, 1995.

ended up on the front page of Monday's New York Times over the headline "Fighting Erupts in Birmingham."⁹²

Almost immediately, staunch segregationists in the congregation began pressuring Stallings and the deacons to change the church policy admitting blacks. A quarterly church meeting in late April 1963 digressed into an aggressive and mean-spirited confrontation with vocal segregationists. One church member presumed he had the right to choose the type of people he worshipped with and he "didn't choose to worship with Negroes." Segregationists argued that the black visitors had insincere motives in attending First Baptist, and were only interested in publicity. Stallings received numerous harassing phone calls and threatening letters for simply enforcing the church policy. This was a difficult time, Stallings remembered some years later, but the Lord had never promised "us any easy times."⁹³

Several days following the belligerent confrontation, Stallings made a personal plea to the deacons as a man "whose heart was not embarrassed and whose mind was not distressed" over racial equality. He urged the church leaders to preserve the open-door policy. The issue had never been about

⁹² John Chandler, conversation with author, September 8, 1995; Alabama Baptist, March 18, 1993; New York Times, April 15, 1963.

⁹³ First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Church Conference and Deacon Minutes, January 12, 1955 to September 15, 1965; "Excerpts," Chandler Papers; Earl Stallings, telephone conversation with author, May 4, 1992.

examining the motives of church visitors, but whether the church would "do the Christian thing" and seat blacks who attended worship services, Stallings emphasized. The preacher pleaded for a unanimous reaffirmation of the church policy to show a sense of solidarity and unity. The deacons, however, voted sixteen to ten in favor of the policy and presented the recommendation to the entire congregation. Stallings and several deacons stood before church members and explained that a reversal in policy would embarrass all Southern Baptists. The church voted 182 to 136 in favor of retaining open admission for all who seek to worship regardless of race, color, creed, or social position.⁹⁴ Contentions and divisions between moderate and radical elements in the church had divided the congregation for nearly a decade. In 1962, Stallings was the fourth pastor since 1952 in a period of increasing uncertainty and instability. Previously, from 1901 to 1952, First Baptist had only three pastors in a period of great stability and growth (flourishing with almost 3,500 members in 1952). One church member believed that assuming the pastorate at First Baptist was a no-win situation; similar to following Paul "Bear" Bryant as football coach at the University of Alabama. The church had a Jekyll and Hyde personality: formidable leadership and a tremendous presence

⁹⁴ Personal notes from Deacons's meetings, April 1963, Chandler Papers.

in the community, but an equally potent commitment of a vocal minority to the traditions of segregation.⁹⁵

A couple of blocks away at First Presbyterian, Reverend Edward Vandiver Ramage also received pressure from a outspoken minority in his church. The first church to erect a building in the fledgling city of Birmingham in 1872, "Old First" had a long history of excellent ministers. Welshman Trevor Mordecai filled the pulpit during the 1920s and had a large following including future U.S. Senate Chaplain Peter Marshall. In 1963, Edward Ramage was entering his eighteenth year as pastor of the stately old church located on the corner of Fourth Avenue North and Twenty-first Street.⁹⁶

That Easter Sunday morning at "Old First," Ramage nervously awaited the entrance of the rumored visitors. Born in Weaverville, North Carolina on October 2, 1908, Ramage attended the conservative Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia from 1929 to 1932. At the time, Columbia was a bastion of Biblical conservatism and Ramage learned to avoid preaching on social issues and discussing racial tensions from

⁹⁵ Timothy Scott McGinnis, "The Controversy and Division of First Baptist Church, Birmingham Alabama, 1968-1970" (Unpublished senior honors thesis, Samford University, May 1990), pp. 19, 21.

⁹⁶ Clarence M. Kilian, ed., "The Old First" of Birmingham, Alabama: From the Founding in 1873 to the Year of our Lord 1952 (Birmingham: Birmingham Publishing Company, 1952), pp. 4-10; Catherine Marshall, A Man Called Peter: The Story of Peter Marshall (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1951), pp. 26-31; The Vanguard Class at First Presbyterian paid for Marshall's seminary training.

the pulpit. Nevertheless, during his tenure at First Presbyterian, the church session had voted to welcome any black visitor to a worship service. The session, however, declined to reveal the decision to the congregation, just in case the visitors never materialized.⁹⁷

Following the processional and call to worship that Easter Sunday, the congregation stood to sing "Jesus Christ is Risen Today." During the hymn, two nervous black women entered the sanctuary from the rear and made their way down the center aisle (since the service had already started, ushers were already seated). With each successive row of pews, the congregation noticed the visitors and dropped their hymn books in disbelief. The singing slowly tapered off like a sing around of "row, row, row your boat" gone astray, until only a few church-goers continued to vocalize the hymn. Ramage's wife Katherine later described the experience as a rolling wave of static electricity standing everyone's hair on end. In the thick tension, Mrs. Ramage thought the air in the auditorium would "crackle."⁹⁸

The only two seats available for the visitors were on the front row next to Dr. Josiah Carmichael, a relative of Oliver

⁹⁷ Katherine Ramage Love, telephone interview by author, tape recording, Pine Bluff, Arkansas, February 28, 1992; Kilian, ed., "The Old First", pp. 12-13; Session Minutes, January 1959 to December 1963, First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Records, BPLDAM.

⁹⁸ "Order of Worship," April 14, 1963, Edward V. Ramage Papers, copies in possession of author; sermon notes, April 1963, Ramage Papers; Ramage Love, interview.

Cromwell Carmichael, the president of the University of Alabama during the Autherine Lucy desegregation episode of the late 1950s. The gracious Carmichael smiled and handed one of the protestors (described as the "two most terrified people in the congregation") his hymn book and pointed to page number 204. A few churchgoers immediately left in protest and apparent disgust.⁹⁹

Ramage had simply titled his Easter sermon, "Jesus." A remarkable extemporaneous speaker, Reverend Ramage never typed a prepared sermon text or used extensive notes. After much prayer and study, he often jotted three words on the back of an envelope and preached for forty-five minutes. This Easter morning in 1963, however, Ramage was painfully aware of the events transpiring in his church and throughout the city. He preached a brief, poorly organized, and rambling sermon that bounced from point to point. While discussing the serious problems facing humanity, Ramage seemed to point to the inner feelings of many in his congregation, noting that the "real warfare" was not between opposing groups but was deep in the "invisible realm where sinister forces, flaming and frantic" were within everyone.¹⁰⁰

Hoping to avoid a media incident following the service, Ramage ended his sermon prematurely. As the congregation

⁹⁹ Ramage Love, interview; Reverend William Ford, telephone conversation with author, September 6, 1995.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

stood to sing the benediction hymn, "The Day of Resurrection," the two civil rights activists bolted down the aisle and out the door. Ramage and his assistant William Ford, made their way down the aisle during the benediction and Ford looked out the back door to see the two girls running down the street. When a group of reporters and photographers arrived a few minutes later, the church was empty.¹⁰¹

Ramage began receiving death threats almost immediately. Late night phone calls started and he had all four of his tires slashed on the automobile the church had purchased for him. Ramage's wife moved the children to the backside of their house, fearing a dynamite blast through the living room window. One Presbyterian colleague wrote that Ramage had been inducted into the "grand fraternity of the harassed" in the South. Belligerents in the church formed a committee of lay persons to investigate the "Communist infiltration and subversion" at First Presbyterian. A few weeks following the Easter Sunday incident, one unyielding segregationist member explained that the only salvation for the church was to "get rid of the Communists" and she pointed a quivering finger toward Ramage and identified him as "one of the biggest."¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Ramage Love, interview; Ford, telephone conversation.

¹⁰² Ibid; Ann Fleming Deagan to Edward Ramage, June 30, 1963, Ramage Papers; McNeill, God Wills Us Free, p. 197.

On the surface, Ramage endured the events with a simple, good nature. Inwardly, the minister agonized over the raging firestorm within his congregation over the racial issues. Old friends stopped speaking to one another, others found new church homes with a less "liberal" pastor, and even families divided over the dilemma. The church elders gathered at a special meeting to discuss the issue of black visitors and Ramage emphasized that he coveted church unity but not at the sacrifice of Christian principles. One of the elders, William J. Rushton, replied, "to hell with Christian principles—we've got to save the church!"¹⁰³

Ramage, however, continued to follow his principles. Every year, the Alabama Education Association used the facilities at First Presbyterian for an annual meeting. When the AEA invited Governor Wallace to speak, Ramage told the teachers union to find a new location for the gathering. "We are not going to have him speaking from our church as though we condone his point of view," Ramage announced. As the petty harassment continued, Ramage expressed his sense of frustration to his confidante, Bishop George Murray. "I wish I had a bishop," Ramage told his friend. "Nobody supports me when I speak out. I understand now the need for bishops."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ McNeill, God Wills Us Free, pp. 197-98; Murray, interview, March 1, 1991.

¹⁰⁴ Ramage Love, interview; Murray, interview, March 1, 1991.

The eight white clergy had little understanding of the role of the media in the civil rights campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. When the clergy issued a public statement in April 1963, they never expected that Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC would use them as a springboard to reach the rest of the nation. The white religious leaders were simply trying to ease local tensions and encourage a calm settlement. They were unschooled in the art of media strategy and had no idea they were about to be thrust into the national spotlight in a highly organized public relations campaign.

CHAPTER III

A GOSPEL OF PUBLICITY: THE PRODUCTION AND PUBLICATION
OF THE *LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL*

From its inception, the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* was never intended as a personal correspondence among the clergy. A look at the text, the production, and the initial publication of the *Letter* reveals that the document was created for circulation in the mass media. The text, while at times appearing quite personal, clearly was written with a vast general audience in mind. The exact circumstances surrounding the *Letter's* production remain vague and contradictory, pointing to a broader public relations goal. Once completed, SCLC associates appealed to an already emotionally involved press corp with an extensive and highly effective public relations strategy—making impressive use of Biblical symbolism and rhetoric.

On the surface, the production of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* appeared to be a spontaneous event, with little or no planning involved. From the beginning to the end, the Birmingham campaign had been planned to secure maximum press coverage. Like the *Letter* itself, the Birmingham movement was a coming together of all of King's ideas, theology, experiences, and civil rights tactics. Remarkably, the idea of producing a document like the *Letter* had been in place for some time. What King and the movement needed was the perfect time, the appropriate place, the

perfect immediate audience in the eight Birmingham clergy, and an impassioned press corps.

The idea of a public rebuke of southern white religious leaders and what King viewed as a monolithic white church had long appealed to the civil rights leader. King had even considered writing a piece in the form of an open letter on several occasions prior to the Birmingham campaign. At the close of the 1950s, King joined the editorial staff of the *Christian Century* with hopes of writing "occasional articles and letters" to influence Protestant leadership and express his deep disappointment in the white church. Previously, in his book on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King had foreshadowed his future Birmingham composition by noting that "with individual exceptions the white ministers, from whom I had naively expected so much, gave little." Notwithstanding, several months after joining the *Christian Century*, editors planned a special Christmas issue with a series of open letters "in such a form that they can actually be sent to the people to whom they are addressed as well as appearing in the columns of the magazine." King, however, did not write a public letter at this time, but perhaps deemed this a worthwhile avenue to reach the public at large.¹

¹ Keith D. Miller, Voices of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources (New York: The Free Press, 1992), pp. 162-63; Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1958), p. 209.

Several months later during the Albany movement of 1962, the idea of a prison epistle penned by King foreshadowed the Birmingham document and its media campaign. Harvey Shapiro of the New York Times had contacted SCLC officials and solicited King to write a letter during his incarceration in the small south Georgia town. For some reason, perhaps due to the extensive problems in Albany and the poor press coverage, the idea was dismissed. SCLC executive Chauncey Eskridge, following a consultation with Billy Graham's public relations specialist, had advised King to not write anything for the mass media while in jail. The notion of a prison epistle was simply postponed for a year, until all the factors seemed perfect for King and the SCLC to compose and release the *Letter*.²

Exactly how and when King received news of the white clergy's statement remains unclear. King later said that he had read the statement in the newspaper: probably one of the Saturday Birmingham newspapers (the morning Post-Herald or the afternoon News) or perhaps the Sunday New York Times.³ Taylor Branch suggested that Clarence Jones smuggled newspapers to King (which means the jailed civil rights leader saw the statement on or after Monday, April 15). King biographer

² Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 602.

³ On April 13, the white minister's statement appeared on page two of the Birmingham News and on page ten in the Birmingham Post-Herald; part of the white ministers statement also appeared in the Sunday, April 14 New York Times.

Stephen Oates noted that movement attorneys gave King a copy of the Saturday newspaper on Tuesday, April 16.⁴ Both are extremely late dates for a lengthy composition dated April 16.

Wyatt Walker, however, later indicated that he had "relayed the news" of the statement to the jailed civil rights leader. As the Birmingham campaign evolved, Walker and others apparently decided the time was right for the prison cell letter. Possibly, Walker sent word of the white religious leaders' statement to King and urged a written response. The *Letter* could have been addressed to any one of the chorus of critics from throughout the country. Yet, for an accomplished public relations strategist like Walker, this seemed a golden opportunity for publicity: an entire media crusade centered on the biblical image of a lone apostolic leader, confined to a jail cell, writing a letter of admonishment and love to his accusers and fellow churchmen.⁵

This scenario seems likely, since someone other than King had the initial idea of publishing a response to the eight white ministers in Birmingham. In the Sunday, April 14 New York Times, journalist Foster Hailey reported that

⁴ Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 737; Oates, Let the Trumpet, p. 215.

⁵ Walker quote in Eugene P. Walker, "A History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1965: The Evolution of a Southern Strategy for Social Change" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1978), p. 140; Clark, "The American Dilemma in King," p. 35.

unidentified individuals in Birmingham were "drawing up an answer" to the eight clerics. They planned to tell the white clergy that the time for compromise had passed and blacks in Birmingham wanted an immediate move toward integration. Waiting was no longer an option. Since the Times' Sunday edition deadline was Saturday at approximately 3:30 p.m (Central Time), it seemed unlikely King received and read a copy of the statement and relayed the information via a brief attorney's visit to movement headquarters and then to Hailey. Most likely Wyatt Walker had leaked word of an already planned prison letter to the Times' correspondent.⁶

Regardless, Martin Luther King began his composition under "somewhat constricting" conditions—writing around the margins of the newspaper in which the white ministers' statement appeared. During a brief guard-supervised exercise period, Ralph Abernathy had a whispered conversation with King about the Letter. "Did they give you anything to write on?" Abernathy asked. "No," King replied, "I'm using toilet paper." Apparently a generous black jail attendant provided King with additional scraps of paper for the essay and later in the week, SCLC attorneys provided a notepad.⁷

⁶ New York Times, April 14, 1963; Harrison Salisbury, Without Fear or Favor: The New York Times and its Times (New York: Times Books, 1980), p. 6; Salisbury called the Saturday deadline the "magic hour."

⁷ King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 76; Abernathy, And the Walls, pp. 253-54.

As he began the rough outlines of the *Letter*, King's only light in his jail cell was scant sun deflected from a small opening high atop the back wall. "You will never know the meaning of utter darkness," King later wrote, "until you have lain in such a dungeon, knowing that sunlight is streaming overhead and still seeing only darkness below." As late as Friday, April 19, New York attorney Stanley Levison complained that King still had no light in his jail cell.⁸

King apparently used his attorneys to shuttle notes and drafts of the *Letter* to and from Walker. Arthur Shores, Orzell Billingsley, Norman C. Amaker, and Clarence Jones all claimed that they served as couriers. Jones remembered one visit in particular, where King pulled the newspaper containing the white ministers' statement from under his shirt and explained the strange scrawl of handwriting around the margins of the paper. "I'm writing this letter," he told Jones. "I want you to try to get it out, if you can."⁹

At movement headquarters in the Gaston Motel, Walker deciphered King's "chicken scratched" handwriting and had his secretary Willie Pearl Mackey type drafts of the document. Walker then returned drafts via the lawyers to the jail the next day for editing. King's cup had overflowed with the

⁸ King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 74; *The Martin Luther King, Jr. FBI File, pt. II: the King-Levison File* (Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1987), microfilm, Joan Davis phone call to Stanley Levison, April 19, 1963, p. 2.

⁹ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, pp. 738, 740.

eight white clergy, Walker believed, and the *Letter* was going to be an historic document. Walker dated the completed *Letter* Tuesday, April 16, 1963—several days prior to King's release from jail on Saturday, April 20.¹⁰

The text focused upon a central theme of justification. King defended the civil rights movement in Birmingham (and elsewhere), its timing, and the use of nonviolent direct action. He addressed six major issues: negotiation, timing, breaking laws, triggering violence, the myth of time, and extremism. He also focused on two significant sub-issues: rebuking white moderates and disillusionment with the white church in general.¹¹

To prove his points King used Biblical references, quoting classical and modern philosophers, theologians, church and western historical figures. Furthermore, to lift the rhetoric to a higher level, King symbolically assumed the voice of the Apostle Paul. As one author discovered, King rhetorically exploited parallels between his own life and the Apostle Paul. Like Paul's writings, the *Letter* seemed more like a sermon than a correspondence and was meant for a larger audience than those addressed. Similar to Paul, King remained separated from his audience, spoke with Apostolic authority,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 740.

¹¹ Fulkerson, "The Public Letter," pp. 125-27.

apostle (deriving from the Greek word "apostolos" meaning an ambassador, a messenger, or "he that was sent"). As Paul had, the civil rights leader professed he too had faithfully answered the "Macedonian call for aid." This was a Biblical reference to Acts 16: 9-10, where Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia begging him to "come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul immediately got ready and left for Macedonia, concluding that "God had called us to preach the gospel to them."¹⁴

Furthermore, King rebuked the religious leaders for using the shallow, provincial outside agitator argument. The civil rights leader emphasized a common destiny for all communities and states in America and stressed his unwillingness to "sit idly by" in Atlanta and remain unconcerned about injustices in Birmingham. "Injustice anywhere was a threat to justice everywhere," he insisted.¹⁵

Continuing, the minister chided his fellow clergy for deploring the demonstrations and apparently disregarding the condition of the black community and race relations in the city. He alluded to a superficiality among the white ministers and believed the eight men would reject a social analysis that only dealt with effects and not underlying

¹⁴ James Strong, "Dictionary of the Greek Testament" in The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), p. 15; King, "Letter," pp. 1-2; Acts 16:9-10 New International Version.

¹⁵ King, "Letter," p. 2.

and used prison as an "ironic pulpit" for encouragement and admonishment.¹²

The text of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* opened with King clearly addressing the eight white clergy, his symbolic audience. King explained that he rarely took time out of his schedule to respond to those individuals critical of his work and ideas. King received volumes of dissenting mail everyday, ranging from mild criticism to hate-filled condemnation. Notwithstanding, he believed the eight white ministers in Birmingham were men of "genuine goodwill" and their criticisms were "sincerely set forth" and he hoped to answer them in "patient and reasonable terms." What emerged from King's pen was an eloquent *Letter* of justification and admonishment.¹³

King answered the white ministers' charge that outsiders were leading the demonstrations. He explained that he was in Birmingham because of organizational ties to Fred Shuttlesworth's Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (an SCLC affiliate). Moreover, King was in Birmingham because of the injustice in the city. Just as Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles had carried their messages to other nations, King was compelled to take the "gospel of freedom" beyond Atlanta. Like Paul, King claimed the authority of an

¹² Mia Klein, "The Other Beauty of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'Letter from Birmingham Jail.'" College Composition and Communication 32 (February 1981): 30; Malinda Snow, "Martin Luther King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' as Pauline Epistle" Quarterly Journal of Speech 71 (August 1985): 319-20.

¹³ King, "Letter," p. 1.

causes. He agreed that the demonstrations were unfortunate but found it even more unfortunate that Birmingham's white power structure had left no alternative.¹⁶

King pointed out that the movement had gone through the four basic steps in a nonviolent campaign: fact collection, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action. The civil rights leader emphasized the "hard, brutal, and unbelievable" facts of the racial injustice that engulfed Birmingham. He called the city the "most thoroughly segregated" in the country and stressed the widespread image and sinister reality of police brutality, unsolved bombings, and unjust treatment of blacks in the judicial system.¹⁷

Local blacks attempted to negotiate a change in these conditions, King noted, but Birmingham officials refused to bargain in "good faith." In September 1962, local blacks turned to the city's business leaders and received several commitments, including the promise to remove the humiliating "colored only" signs in department stores. Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth called a moratorium on demonstrations, but the business leaders (under pressure from Connor) had broken the promise and the signs remained.¹⁸

Confronted with "blasted hopes," King insisted that "we had no alternative" (although he was not personally involved)

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

other than to continue along the road to direct action and begin the process of self purification. He explained to the ministers the Paul-inspired concept of demonstrators using their "very bodies" as living sacrifices in an appeal before the conscience of the city and the nation. The SCLC's direct action campaign targeted the business community during the busy Easter shopping season.¹⁹

King emphasized, however, that they postponed the movement twice until after the mayoral election and again until after the run-off so the demonstrations would not "cloud the issues" of the campaign. This postponement aided the community and demonstrated that the SCLC had moved carefully and responsibly into direct action, the civil rights leader believed.²⁰

He then moved on to a justification of the use of direct action—the most important part of the *Letter* in light of the failures in Albany. The purpose of nonviolent direct action was to create a crisis and establish "creative tension" to force a community to negotiate. While King had preached and worked against violent tension, he saw nonviolent tension as necessary for growth. He compared these methods to Socrates's creation of intellectual tension for individuals to rise above myths and experience the "unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal." Nonviolent tension in a

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

society helped citizens to rise above racism to the "majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood." King concurred with the white ministers' call for negotiation but he believed he had the best way to facilitate such an open discussion. For too long "our beloved Southland" tragically attempted to exist in "monologue rather than dialogue," he explained.²¹

King then turned to the white ministers' contention that the demonstrations had been "unwise and untimely" in light of the change in city government. He believed the new administration needed prompting to act as much as did the old. No new millennium in Birmingham had dawned with the election of Albert Boutwell, and although King found him more "articulate and gentle" than Eugene "Bull" Connor, he also considered the new mayor equally dedicated to preserving segregation. The black minister believed that only pressure from civil rights activists would enable Boutwell to see the hopelessness of massive resistance. Addressing his friends, King noted that he had achieved nothing in the civil rights arena without resolute pressure on whites, who seldom gave up privileges voluntarily. He pointed to Reinhold Niebuhr, who stressed that groups were more immoral than individuals.²²

Continuing, King eloquently wrote what New York Times journalist Foster Hailey had reported the day after the civil rights leader had been arrested: the time for gradual change

²¹ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

²² Ibid., p. 5.

had passed and blacks now insisted on immediate desegregation. For years, the civil rights leader had heard the word "wait" from those people who had never experienced the "stinging darts" of segregation. Nearly 340 years had passed and blacks still waited for their constitutional and "God-given" rights. To further illustrate his point, King used his most emotional and persuasive plea: an over three-hundred-word sentence—a series of dependent clauses, exploring the troubled souls of segregated southern blacks in the long night of waiting:

". . . [W]hen you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million negro brothers smothering in an air tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored;" when your first name becomes "nigger" and your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs.;" when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever

fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness;" then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."²³

A time had come, King noted, when the "cup of endurance" overflowed and a people were no longer willing to tolerate such injustice and despair. The civil rights leader hoped the white ministers could understand the "legitimate and unavoidable impatience" of most blacks.²⁴

Subsequently he appraised the law and order theme emphasized in the white ministers' statement. King explained why he had been willing to obey some laws and break others. He pointed to two types of laws, just and unjust. He cited St. Augustine's admonition that an unjust law was "no law at all" and St. Thomas Aquinas's belief that an unjust law was a human decree not rooted in eternal and natural laws. In distinguishing between just and unjust laws, he described the just law as a code in line with moral or Godly edicts; while the unjust law was in discord with these laws. All segregation ordinances, King resolutely presumed, were unjust because they distorted souls and damaged the personalities. Paraphrasing the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, segregation substituted an "I-it" for an "I-thou" relationship and relegated people to the "status of things." Accordingly, theologian Paul Tillich had maintained that sin was separation: Hence, King saw segregation as an "existential

²³ Ibid., pp. 5-7.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

expression" of human separation, estrangement, and sinfulness.²⁵

King continued to make several more distinctions between just and unjust laws. The civil rights leader considered an unjust law a code inflicted by a majority on a minority, that the majority was unwilling to apply to itself. He pointed to the "devious methods" used to prevent blacks from registering to vote and questioned whether the Alabama legislature that enacted the segregation laws had been democratically elected. Sometimes on the surface a law appeared just but it was unjust in its application. For example, King stated that it was just to have an ordinance to require a parade permit. The ordinance, however, became unjust when used to maintain segregation and deny the right to peaceful protest.²⁶

He hoped the white ministers would understand the distinction he presented. He never advocated defying a law as belligerent segregationists defied the Brown decision and other integration measures. Disobeying an unjust law must be done with love, not hate; with an obedient attitude and a willingness to accept the consequences. Reflecting the words and actions of Henry David Thoreau, King firmly believed a person expressed the "highest respect for the law" by breaking a code they deemed unjust and willingly accepting a jail term to "arouse the conscience of the community." For example, had

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

he lived in Nazi Germany under the iron rule of Adolph Hitler, he would have illegally eased the suffering of his "Jewish brothers" or had he resided in a Communist country where the government suppressed the Christian faith, he would have advocated disobeying the anti-religious codes. Rooted in the Judeo-Christian heritage, the civil rights leader also pointed to Old Testament figures Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as early practitioners of this manner of civil disobedience.²⁷

King next turned his attention to the white moderates. He had almost reached the unfortunate conclusion that the greatest stumbling block in the black stride toward freedom was neither the belligerent members of the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klan, but the white moderate. King believed white moderates were more devoted to "order" than to justice; preferred a negative peace (the absence of tension) to a positive peace (the presence of justice). They had consistently told blacks that they agreed with the quest for racial equality, but rejected the use of direct action. While urging blacks to wait for a "more convenient season," white moderates lived with a mythical concept of time by paternalistically determining the hour of another race's freedom. This "shallow understanding" from men of goodwill, King believed, was "more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will." Drawing a parallel with Christ's renunciation of lukewarm Christianity in the

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

book of Revelation, King rejected a lukewarm acceptance from white moderates as "more bewildering than outright rejection."²⁸

Turning to the white ministers' central theme, King rejected the clergy's concept of law and order as a dangerous roadblock to social progress. The civil rights leader believed law and order existed to establish justice for all citizens. The tension in the South was a necessary transition from an "obnoxious negative peace" (where passive blacks accepted a life of injustice) to a "substantive-filled," positive peace (where all people had respect, dignity, and worth). The nonviolent civil rights movement had not created the tension in the South, it had simply brought to the surface the hidden tension for everyone to see. "Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light," King wrote, "injustice must likewise be exposed with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured."²⁹

The white ministers erred, King believed, in denouncing the civil rights demonstrations as a precipitant to violence. This was similar to condemning a robbery victim because the money in his possession precipitated the crime or condemning

²⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁹ Ibid.

Socrates because his philosophy and commitment to truth precipitated the "misguided popular mind to make him drink hemlock." Was not this criticism, King asked the white ministers, like condemning Jesus because His devotion to God's will precipitated crucifixion? "We must come to see, as federal courts have consistently affirmed, that it is immoral to urge an individual to withdraw his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest precipitates violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber."³⁰

The civil rights leader again criticized the white moderates' concepts of time. King referred to the letter he had received from a white Christian in Texas urging slow, gradual change and accusing black activists of seeking equal rights in a great "religious hurry." This tragic misconception of time was irrational, King argued, and rested upon the naive idea that time inevitably cured society's problems. Belligerent segregationists made more constructive use of time than the white moderates. This generation, the civil rights leader concluded, would repent, not only for the belligerence of segregationists, but for the "appalling silence of the good people." Progress never rolled in "on wheels of inevitability," King emphasized, but through the untiring endeavors of God's "co-workers." Without these diligent efforts, time became an ally of social stagnation.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 10-11A.

The time was "always ripe to do right," he demanded. Now was the time to provide blacks with democratic guarantees and "transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood." Now was the time to raise the public agenda from the "quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity."³¹

Nevertheless, the white ministers had considered King's efforts to achieve these immediate goals as extremist. Countering this charge, the civil rights leader argued that he stood as a moderating force between two opposing forces in the black community: the complacent black (those drained of respect by years of oppression or those profiting from segregation) and the militant black nationalist (those "nourished" by frustration over continuing discrimination and concluding all whites were the devil—especially Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam). Through the influence of the black church, King advocated a "more excellent way of love" through nonviolent protest. If blacks had never cultivated this ideology, he was certain that "floods of blood" would engulf southern streets. Accordingly, if whites refused to support nonviolence and dismissed protestors as extremists and outsiders, millions of blacks would turn to the black nationalists, leading to a "frightening racial nightmare."³²

³¹ Ibid., pp. 11A-11B.

³² Ibid., pp. 11B-12.

Oppressed people never remained oppressed forever, King contended. Consciously or unconsciously, the freedom movements in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean had engulfed America's black community with a sense of urgency to push toward the "promised land of racial justice." This explained and justified the public demonstrations. Blacks had few outlets for their frustrations: So let them march, King exhorted; let them stage sit-ins and freedom rides. "If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence." This was not a threat, King emphasized, but a "fact of history." He had urged blacks to channel discontent through nonviolent direct action which the white ministers had condemned in their statement as an act of extremism.³³

The civil rights leader, however, gained a "measure of satisfaction" from the extremist label. To illustrate his point, King pointed to Jesus, the prophet Amos, the apostle Paul, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson as examples of historical extremists. The South, the nation, and the world desperately needed more creative extremists for love and justice. He had hoped white moderates would recognize this need. Nevertheless, members of an oppressor race had little understanding of the "deep groans and passionate yearnings" of the oppressed. Even fewer whites had the vision to see justice prevail through "strong,

³³ Ibid., p. 12.

persistent and determined action." Some of the South's whites, however, understood and embraced the goals of the civil rights movement. King pointed to Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden, and James McBride Dabbs as sympathetic and articulate voices from the southern white community. Other whites marched and suffered with King in many southern cities. Unlike the moderates, these whites had acknowledged the movement's importance and discerned a need for action to "combat the disease of segregation."³⁴

King next turned specifically to his disappointment with the white church and its leadership. Recognizing the "significant stands" the white ministers had taken in fighting segregation, the civil rights leader commended Earl Stallings for making a "Christian stand" and welcoming the black visitors to First Baptist Church on Easter Sunday.³⁵ These actions, King believed, were simply notable exceptions. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the mid-1950s, King had hoped for the support of the white church and its leaders. Nonetheless some church leaders opposed the movement, while others "remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows."³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 12-14.

³⁵ King also commended Catholic leaders for integrating Spring Hill College in Mobile.

³⁶ King, "Letter," p. 14.

King had optimistically expected Birmingham's white religious leaders to recognize the justice of the civil rights movement and, with a "deep moral concern," serve as a door to the power structure. "I had hoped that each of you would understand," he wrote. "But again I have been disappointed." He longed to hear southern religious leaders exhort their congregations to obey a desegregation ruling, not because it was simply the law, but because it was a moral imperative. As blacks suffered injustice, white churches had remained aloof and simply mouthed "pious irrelevances [sic] and sanctimonious trivialities." King also criticized church leaders for failing to emphasize social issues. Most churches emphasized an other-world religion with a bizarre "distinction between body and soul," and sacred and secular. Religion in the South had accommodated the social order and emerged as a "taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice."³⁷

King often observed the stately churches in Mississippi and Alabama and wondered "What kind of people worshiped here?" "Who was their God?" "Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification?" "Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred?" (The white clergy found this statement particularly offensive in light of the stand they made against Wallace in January 1963). "Where were

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"³⁸

King wept "tears of love" over the church's indifferent attitude. There was no deep disappointment without deep love. The church was the body of Christ, but it had been "blemished and scarred" by social negligence and the fear of nonconformity. The church was once a powerful social force. The early church was not "merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society." Early Christians pressed on in the face of intimidation and adversity. Though small in numbers, they maintained a giant commitment to God and brought an end to the ancient evils of infanticide and gladiator contests.³⁹

King believed, however, the modern church had a weak and ineffectual voice with an "uncertain sound." The southern church was a defender of the social order through silence or vocal support. If the church was unable to recapture the spirit of the apostolic age, society would dismiss it as an "an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century." Perhaps organized religion was too closely tied to

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 15-16; Shuttlesworth, interview; the eight white clergy had condemned Wallace for his statements, but Fred Shuttlesworth later called this a mere "pebble in the ocean."

³⁹ King, "Letter," p. 16.

the status-quo to save the world. King believed he must turn his faith to the "inner spiritual church" as the world's last hope.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, some in the church had thrown off the "paralyzing chains of conformity" and stood for King's concepts of racial justice. These "noble souls" had marched in Albany, Georgia or participated in Freedom Rides. Some had gone to jail. Others had lost their pulpits. Their witness was the "spiritual salt" that had preserved the "true meaning of the Gospel in these troubled times."⁴¹

Even if the church failed to confront the status quo, King never despaired or feared the outcome of the Birmingham struggle. Although scorned and abused, the black destiny was bound with America's destiny. Before the Pilgrims came to the New World or Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, blacks lived in America. They had suffered through slavery. "If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us," King wrote, "the opposition we now face will surely fail."⁴²

Before closing, King turned to the white ministers' praise for the Birmingham police force. Had the ministers seen police dogs bite six blacks or observed the harsh treatment in the Birmingham Jail, he argued, their viewpoints would be different. King admitted the police department (in

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴² Ibid.

these early weeks of the movement) had been rather restrained and even "nonviolent" in handling the demonstrators. "But for what purpose?" he asked. They were using a moral system (nonviolence) to maintain an immoral status quo (segregation). Paraphrasing T. S. Eliot, King saw "no greater treason" than carrying out the "right deed for the wrong reason."⁴³

The civil rights leader wished the white ministers had praised the demonstrators for their courage and capacity to suffer. "One day the South will recognize its real heroes," he wrote, pointing to examples of the University of Mississippi's first black student, James Meredith, and the old black woman in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, who proclaimed with "ungrammatical profundity" that her feet were tired, but her soul was rested. One day the South would recognize that these "disinherited children of God" had stood for the American dream and Judeo-Christian values. They had moved an entire nation back to the true spirit of democracy as advocated by the founding fathers.⁴⁴

In his conclusion and with a note of irony, King surmised that he had never written such a lengthy correspondence ("or should I say a book?" he added). He believed he had taken too much of the white ministers' "precious time." Had the civil rights leader composed the *Letter* from a comfortable desk, it would be much shorter, he presumed. But what activities were

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

there in the confines of a jell cell, other than writing lengthy letters, thinking odd thoughts, and praying long prayers. If King had overstated the truth or was unreasonably impatient, he begged the ministers' forgiveness. If he had said anything in the *Letter* that understated the truth, or indicated a patience for anything less than brotherhood, he begged God's forgiveness.⁴⁵

Once again assuming the expectant voice of the Apostle Paul, King hoped the *Letter* would find the ministers "strong in the faith." He also looked forward to meeting each of the religious leaders, "not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother." Lyrically, he hoped the "dark clouds of racial prejudice" would pass away and the "deep fog of misunderstanding" would lift from fearful communities, and "in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood" would "shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty." He closed the *Letter* with the salutation, "Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood," Martin Luther King Jr. The initials of Wyatt Walker's secretary, Willie Pearl Mackey, appeared at the bottom of the text: MLK:wm. The early mass produced versions of the *Letter* had no personal signature from King.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁶ Ibid., see Boutwell version and Durick version.

In fact, the only evidence that King penned this entire text under these exact circumstances and in the short time frame conveyed was based exclusively on the testimonies of those involved in the document's production. Surprisingly, the SCLC staff apparently discarded King's hand-written notes and early drafts of the document that had been secretly smuggled in and out of the Birmingham Jail. As one observer noted, SCLC staffers working on the *Letter* and especially Wyatt Walker, should have recognized the historical significance of King's scribblings and preserved them. After all, Walker had noted on several occasions that he "always sensed" that King was making history.⁴⁷

Adding to the confusion were the slightly different versions of the *Letter* produced by the SCLC publicity corps. A mimeographed version, in the Mayor Albert Boutwell Papers in the Birmingham Public Library, omitted the name of Bishop Paul Hardin in the list of those addressed. A hand-typed carbon copy, obtained by Bishop Joseph Durick at a later date, included Hardin but had editorial corrections in a different handwriting than the Boutwell version. In addition the two versions had been typed on different typewriters. This may explain the assertion by Addine Drew, one of King's friends in

⁴⁷ Of all the volumes written on the movement in Birmingham, only one writer, E. Culpepper Clark has examined the circumstances surrounding the production of the "Letter;" see Clark, "American Dilemma in King," p. 35; Walker quote in Earl and Miriam Selby, Odyssey: Journey Through Black America (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), p. 285.

Birmingham, that she too had obtained the civil rights leader's notes from jail (apart from Walker) and asked Rose White at Miles College to type up the *Letter*.⁴⁸ In addition, by the following year, an extensively edited version of the document appeared in King's book on the Birmingham campaign, Why We Can't Wait.

Evidence reveals that the popular legend that King had written a completed and polished version of the *Letter* over a period of less than seventy-two hours was invented at a later date to provide maximum appeal and impact in the media, once the *Letter* had been released. Analysis of the text of the document and external evidence suggests that the civil rights leader wrote part of the *Letter* in jail and continued writing, editing, and revising drafts (with the assistance of the SCLC publicity corps) several days after the April 16 date on the manuscript and apparently after he had left jail.

In the text of the document, King selectively quoted from the writer of an anonymous correspondence (signed simply "yours, In Christ's Service"). Setting forth the arguments of many white moderates, the letter writer believed all Christians knew that blacks would eventually receive equal rights. Nevertheless, the writer asked King if he and his followers were in "too great of a religious hurry?" It had taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it had, because Biblical teachings of Jesus Christ took

⁴⁸ Clark, "American Dilemma in King," p. 40.

time to come to earth. King wrote in the *Letter* that he had received this correspondence the morning of April 16 from a "white brother in Texas" (although the letter made no mention of gender). Unquestionably, King received this dispatch at some later date. The letter had an April 15, afternoon postmark from Dallas, Texas and movement officials later stamped an April 25, 1963 date across the top of the page (presumably the date received).⁴⁹

Other evidence also points to King's continued work on the *Letter* after April 16. King complained to Stanley Levison on May 20, 1963 that while he was writing the document, the text had grown so long that he had slashed several additional sections (perhaps as many as fifteen thousand words). That many additional words more than tripled the size of the original *Letter* from twenty pages of typed double spaced text to almost seventy-five pages. If all of this occurred while King was in jail, he wrote, by hand, well over a hundred pages of text in a relatively short period of time. He accomplished this with no desk, writing only during daylight hours (and even then in poor lighting). As one writer suggested, this

⁴⁹ Anonymous to Martin Luther King, Jr., n.d., Southern Christian Leadership Conference Papers, King Center; King eliminated the quote "We have come a long way, haven't we?" The letter writer further added: "Even so, a thousand years can be as only one day to God. We are all impatient--probably because we are Americans--but we have to allow God the necessary time to accomplish His purpose in the hearts of the people. May God help all of you to be extremely careful in your desire to carry out His wishes, by making you very alert in recognizing Him as your Leader. yours, In Christ's Service."

many pages of hand-written text would have been an extraordinary endeavor for any author even under the best of circumstances. Furthermore, in the transcription of the phone-tapped conversation between the civil rights leader and Levison, King never remarked that he had written any of these sections while in the Birmingham Jail.⁵⁰

King explained that he had written and later removed a forceful section from the *Letter* on the concept of how the struggle to "save the soul of America" had freed both blacks and whites. In addition, he had omitted a long section on the gap between American foreign and domestic policy. While fighting the Cold War abroad, America had condemned the Communist block for human rights violations. This appeared inconsistent in light of the racial problems on the U.S. domestic front. "I was appealing to them on the basis of understanding this," King said. "There's more I could put in on this." King apparently viewed the *Letter* as a document that had not been set in stone while he was in jail and might be expanded or contracted at his whim. "In adding to it," Levison told King, he was making the document "even stronger."⁵¹

Editor Hermine I. Popper, further strengthened the text of the *Letter* for King's book on the Birmingham campaign, Why

⁵⁰ Clark, "American Dilemma in King," p. 35; *The King-Levison File*, Martin Luther King phone call to Stanley Levison, May 21, 1963, p. 6.

⁵¹ Ibid.

We Can't Wait, released in 1964. Popper discovered several details in the text "which had not actually occurred at the time" King was in jail. Levison again acknowledged that King had revised the *Letter* at a later date and inserted "additional material."⁵² Levison advised Popper to include the material but in a "very general way," presumably to indicate that King had written these sections while in jail. As an example, Levison told Popper to change the passage about police dogs attacking six unarmed blacks. "Just leave out the six and put the remainder in," he said. Popper subsequently changed the original text from: "I don't believe you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its angry violent dogs literally biting six unarmed, nonviolent Negroes" to the text printed in Why We Can't Wait "I doubt that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes."⁵³

These questions of timing and authenticity suggest that the production of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* was part of a highly organized overall campaign for publicity. Other evidence also hinted that the document was written and

⁵² *The King-Levison File*, Hermine Popper phone call to Stanley Levison, January 24, 1964, p. 1; this editing apparently occurred before the *Letter* received revisions for King's book on the Birmingham campaign, since no new additional passages were included in the book version.

⁵³ *Ibid.* King, "Letter," p. 18; King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 93.

distributed for media consumption. Before the movement began, Fred Shuttlesworth, King, and Ralph Abernathy had agreed to issue only joint statements to the press. As Shuttlesworth later emphasized, if this agreement had been followed, the *Letter* would have been signed by "all of us . . . simply because we had agreed to do things together."⁵⁴ At the very least, the *Letter* did not accord with Shuttlesworth's expectations. Accordingly, we should be able to induce that he saw the manuscript as a publicity document and a cooperative effort by King and others within the movement.

The eight white clergy addressed in the document provided the best evidence of the broad purpose of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. These religious leaders in Birmingham never received a personalized copy of the manuscript. Certainly King and the SCLC had used the white ministers as rhetorical targets in an impersonal and strategically planned publicity campaign.

This evidence, however, does not imply that members of the SCLC staff had written the entire *Letter*. King did make extensive use of ghostwriters for most of his public writings and speeches. Yet, in closely examining the text of these early press release versions of the document, the composer, presumably King, was writing random thoughts from memory. Many of the direct quotations in the document were inexact or

⁵⁴ Raines, My Soul is Rested, p. 161; regardless, Shuttlesworth added that King deserved "all the credit."

paraphrased, suggesting someone writing from recollection. For example, in one of these typed versions of the *Letter* the author paraphrases T. S. Eliot's admonition that there was no greater treason than to "do the right deed for the wrong reason." The passage was later changed for King's book to the correct and direct quote of "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason."⁵⁵

Despite the impersonal uses of the document, the *Letter* had a strikingly personal appearance. In virtually every reproduction of the *Letter* the names of the eight white ministers appeared at the beginning of the text. Adding to the personal guise of the document, King directly addressed the white ministers as "you" some forty times. He also used the personal pronoun "I" 139 times. The typed manuscript had twenty pages, forty-eight paragraphs, 325 sentences, and roughly 7,110 words of typed text.⁵⁶ This was a rebuttal to the white ministers' one page, seven paragraphs, eighteen sentences, and 428 words of typed text.

The SCLC presented the document to the public as an open letter—a letter addressed to specific people, but intended for a larger audience. This remains part of the *Letter's*

⁵⁵ King, "Letter," p. 19; King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 94.

⁵⁶ Robert P. Fulkerson, "The Public Letter as a Rhetorical Form: Structure, Logic, and Style in King's 'Letter From Birmingham Jail.'" " The Quarterly Journal of Speech 65 (April 1979): 132-33; the average sentence has 22 words and the average paragraph has seven sentences or 149 words.

appeal, as it moves on two fronts: first as an apparent private correspondence among American Judeo-Christian religious leaders and second to the country's citizens en masse.⁵⁷

Despite the moving rhetoric of the *Letter*, King and the SCLC staff provided little new material for the text of the document. The endeavor was simply a synthesis of ideas, themes, sermons, and writings King had produced over the years. As one King observer discovered, the civil rights leader frequently borrowed from himself—readily interchanging material from speeches, sermons, and writings. King's "Challenge to the Churches and Synagogues" was one of clearest precursors to the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Delivered three months earlier at a National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago, the speech addressed many of the same themes as the Birmingham document: justification for the movement, admonishment and disappointment with the white church, and the "urgency of now" in the black struggle for equality.⁵⁸

Throughout the text of the *Letter*, King directly quoted from the Chicago oration. For example, in both the speech and

⁵⁷ Douglas Sturm, "Crisis in the American Republic: The Legal and Political Significance of Martin Luther King's 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,'" reprinted in Martin Luther King, Jr.: Civil Rights Leader, Theologian, Orator, ed. David J. Garrow (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1989), p. 945; Fulkerson, "The Public Letter," pp. 123, 132.

⁵⁸ Miller, Voices of Deliverance, p. 150; Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Challenge to the Churches and Synagogues," (paper presented at the National Conference on Religion and Race, Chicago, Ill., January 17, 1963), copy in Durick Papers.

the *Letter*, King blasted the white church for demonstrating more caution than courage and remaining "silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows." In both instances, the civil rights leader used phrases such as "jet like pace," "horse and buggy speed," "pious irrelevances and sanctimonious trivialities," and other examples.⁵⁹

King and the SCLC also used other sermons as the basis for the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. From King's sermon "Transformed Nonconformist," they drew similar quotes and examples from the historical and Biblical figures like Jefferson, Lincoln, Bunyan, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In both this sermon and the *Letter* he noted that the church had become a "weak and ineffectual trumpet making uncertain sounds." Additionally, in numerous sermons and writings, King referred to the "ungrammatical profundity," of the elderly black woman in Montgomery, who had tired feet, but a rested soul.⁶⁰

As Keith Miller discovered in his study of King's rhetorical sources, the civil rights leader also skillfully "borrowed" arguments and ideas from others and blended them with his own identity and language. In the text of the

⁵⁹ King, "Transformed Nonconformist," in Strength To Love, pp. 8-15; King said the white church had been called to "combat social evils," but had "remained silent behind stained-glass windows;" King, "Letter," pp. 6, 15.

⁶⁰ King, "Transformed Nonconformist" in Strength to Love, pp. 10, 12, 14; King, "Antidotes for Fear" in Strength to Love, p. 116; King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 10.

Letter, King's primary sources included Harry Emerson Fosdick, Harris Wofford, George Kelsey, H. H. Crane, the *Christian Century*, and black folk preachers. Several passages from these sources sound remarkably similar to sections of the *Letter*. From Fosdick, King had borrowed phrases like: "leaven in the lump of the race," "ecclesia," and the story of how early Christians had ended the horrors of "infanticide and bloody gladiatorial contests." Crane had written: "Instead of being *conformed* to this world, [man] can *transform* it. . . . For when he is what his Maker obviously intended him to be, he is not a thermometer; he is a thermostat." King wrote: "In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society." Regardless, of the sources of the *Letter*, such a system of borrowing material would have made the editorial assistance of those involved in the document's production much easier.⁶¹

The prison epistle received no mention in the press for over month, until after the movement in Birmingham had ended. Author Taylor Branch argued that the *Letter* received no publicity for several weeks because it was a "private communication" between King and the eight white ministers. Regardless, the white clergymen never received a personalized,

⁶¹ Miller, *Voices of Deliverance*, pp. 5-6, 162, 164; Fosdick had written how Christianity had "stopped ancient curses like infanticide. It put an end to the . . . gladiatorial shows."

delivered, or signed copy of the Letter from King.⁶² The media, not the white ministers, was the real focus of the document.

On Saturday April 20, King and Abernathy were released from the Birmingham Jail, both looking haggard with an eight-day growth of beard. King told reporters that he had been persuaded contrary to the commitments of his conscience to allow the \$300 bail to be paid so that he could leave jail and continue planning the campaign. The civil rights leader said he had no regrets about violating the injunction. "Morally, we had no other alternative," he added. A week later, Judge William Jenkins held King, Walker, Abernathy, Shuttlesworth and seven other ministers in contempt for a deliberate and blatant disregard of his court order and fixed punishment at five days in jail and a \$50 fine. The SCLC immediately began a lengthy appeal process.⁶³

Nevertheless, while King had been in jail, national news coverage had dwindled. After his release the civil rights leader believed the movement needed a jump start because the press and the American public were losing interest. SCLC associate James Bevel had the answer: recruit thousands of students to overwhelm Bull Connor's police force. This children's crusade provided fresh volunteers for the most

⁶² Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 744.

⁶³ Washington Post, April 21, 1963; Chicago Tribune, May 21, 1963; Birmingham News, April 26, 1963; Washington Post, April 27, 1963.

striking public demonstrations of the campaign. The plan worked to perfection, as a journalist on the scene emphasized, with marches "planned down to the finest detail."⁶⁴

On Friday May 3, youthful demonstrators pushed Connor over the brink and he ordered widespread use of police dogs and fire hoses. The confrontation generated Saturday headlines across the country and was the beginning of an unprecedented week of worldwide media coverage focusing on Birmingham—transforming the city into a "global symbol of America's racial malaise." During these dark days of the Cold War, the Soviet press gleefully exploited the images in Birmingham and an apparent inconsistency in U.S. foreign policy. "We have the impression," reported Radio Moscow, "that American authorities both cannot and do not wish to stop outrages by racists."⁶⁵

The U.S. media obtained possibly the most important visual image of the entire campaign that Friday with a dramatic still photo by Associated Press photographer William Hudson. The public was appalled at the sight of a Birmingham police dog named Leo, held tight on a leash by officer R. E. "Dick" Middleton, attacking a fifteen-year-old black boy named Walter Gadsden.⁶⁶ Almost overnight scores of newspaper,

⁶⁴ Eskew, "But For Birmingham," p. 352; Washington Post, May 3, 1963.

⁶⁵ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 251; Newsweek, December 8, 1969; Time, May 17, 1963.

⁶⁶ Washington Post, May 2, 1963.

magazine, radio, and television journalists descended upon the city (joining veteran reporters of the Birmingham crisis) searching for every possible angle on the racial situation.⁶⁷ Apparently many of the Birmingham grass roots protestors understood the importance of widespread media coverage in breaking down racial barriers. During lulls in the demonstrations, African-Americans yelled at police to "bring on the dogs; bring on the water."⁶⁸

Behind the scenes, as the racial tensions remained high in Birmingham and bail money ran increasingly low, the SCLC began a major national fund raising effort. A half page advertisement donated by northern supporters to "reach like minded friends" appeared in the May 7, 1963 New York Times as an appeal from Birmingham to the "conscience of America." Blacks in Birmingham had endured decades of discrimination in one of the largest segregated cities in the Western Hemisphere, but they had now marched forward. Despite the nearly fourteen hundred blacks in jail at the time, the "will to freedom" had remained vibrant. "We urgently need your help. Please extend your support and extend the Frontier of Democracy—TODAY in the Deep South." The names of King and

⁶⁷ *The King-Levison File*, Stanley Levison phone call to unknown, May 13, 1963, p. 1; Stanley Levison said there were 187 journalists covering the Birmingham movement.

⁶⁸ Washington Post, May 8, 1963.

Shuttlesworth appeared under the text as did a request for checks payable to the SCLC.⁶⁹

The SCLC also circulated form letters in May signed by King to various contributors throughout the nation. Printed on King's personal stationary, the civil rights leader told supporters that he had only been temporarily released from jail to coordinate movement activities. He emphasized that nothing remained of the SCLC's "thin resources" and pleaded for contributions made with "maximum generosity" from those dear friends who shared "hopes and aspirations" for racial justice. "Please let the embattled Negroes of the South know that they are not alone," he pleaded. King pointed out, however, that if his solicitation reached the addressee following a partial victory in Birmingham, their money was still needed to provide a solid foundation for the movement and to take the battle for human rights farther into the Deep South.⁷⁰

Seeking a solid compromise in Birmingham, President John F. Kennedy and the Justice Department pressured King and city officials to end the confrontations. Through the mediation efforts of Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall, King and white business leaders reached an accord on Thursday evening May 9. At joint press conference the next day, King announced

⁶⁹ New York Times, May 7, 1963.

⁷⁰ *The King-Levison File*, Martin Luther King, Jr. fundraising letter, May 1963, attached to memorandum, SAC (Los Angeles) to Director FBI, May 23, 1963.

the city of Birmingham had "reached an accord with its conscience." Shuttlesworth read the points of the settlement to media: a desegregation of public facilities (including lunch counters, drinking fountains, rest rooms and fitting rooms) at downtown stores within ninety days; better employment opportunities for blacks at these stores within sixty days; the release of jailed demonstrators on bond or personal recognizance; and the appointment of a biracial committee within two weeks.⁷¹

Coinciding with the settlement and the fund raising campaign, Wyatt Walker released the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* to the media during the first two weeks of May. With the tension in Birmingham still high, the press paid little attention to the document initially. When the dramatic confrontations ended, the media slowly turned to the *Letter* as a "famous pronouncement of moral triumph" by the victorious King. For Walker and the SCLC, the document began serving its intended purpose as a public relations tool to maintain press interest and to spread the story of the movement in Birmingham. The document also functioned as a symbolic finale to the Birmingham campaign.⁷²

⁷¹ Washington Post, May 11, 1963; New York Times, May 11, 1963.

⁷² Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 744; the earliest excerpt from the "Letter" was printed in the New York Times, May 5, 1963; the following quote appeared in a story on Birmingham: "I stand alone in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is the force of complacency. . . . The other force is one of bitterness and

The New York Times was among the first media outlets to consider publishing the *Letter*. Editor of the Times' Sunday Magazine Harvey Shapiro told Stanley Levison that three or four of King's people had phoned from Birmingham about the document. The Times had decided to publish an edited version of the document with a "little introduction setting forth the circumstances of the piece" in the Sunday, May 26 edition. Just a few days before, Shapiro had asked King to write a feature article based on the *Letter*, but after events took a violent turn in Birmingham, the civil rights leader had his "hands full" and had no time to write another piece.⁷³

The cross-town rival New York Post Sunday Magazine, however, obtained a copy of the *Letter* and published extensive excerpts on May 19, without King's authority. The civil rights leader surmised that Walker had "let a copy get out of the reach of the people that were supposed to see it." The Times subsequently pulled the press release from the publishing schedule and refused to "touch it." A week later, the liberal Christian journal Christianity and Crisis

hatred and comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups." This is slightly different than what appears even in the early typed versions of the "Letter." Although the quote is attributed to King, it is unclear if it came from the document or another source.

⁷³ *The King-Levison File*, Martin Luther King phone call to Stanley Levison, May 23, 1963, pp. 3-4.

published extensively edited excerpts in the May 27 edition.⁷⁴

The American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) also obtained a copy of the *Letter* during early May. Executives circulated the document among the AFSC staff and explained that King's composition was an articulate rationalization of nonviolent protests and a practical answer to perplexing questions that people had as they attempted to understand the broader impact of the Birmingham movement. By May 13 the AFSC had received permission from the SCLC to print the *Letter* for wide dissemination and had corrected the numerous typographical errors in the press release.⁷⁵

The Quakers published fifty thousand copies of the document in pamphlet form for national distribution (at ten cents a copy) among religious groups, labor unions, human relations organizations, and government agencies. Released to the public on May 28 under the title "Tears of Love," the pamphlet included the white ministers' statement and an introductory letter from AFSC Executive Secretary Colin W.

⁷⁴ Ibid. King told Stanley Levison on May 23, 1963, that the Times had asked him to write another letter based on the section in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* in which King expresses deep disappointment with the moderates and answers the charge of being an extremist; New York Post, May 19, 1963; Christianity and Crisis, May 27, 1963.

⁷⁵ Memorandum by Barbara Moffett, May 8, 1963, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (hereafter cited as AFSCA); memorandum by Fred Echelmeyer, May 13, 1963, AFSCA.

Bell.⁷⁶ For over three hundred years, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) had been deeply sympathetic to the concerns of human freedom. Similar to the black struggle for civil rights, Bell noted that sixteenth century Quakers had demonstrated for the right of peaceful association, for freedom of worship, and against the injustices of tyranny. This had often brought the religious order into conflict with established society. Bell pointed to George Fox as a Quaker who had practiced civil disobedience as a "witness to the supremacy of God's commands over the dictates of men." Like King and other civil rights activists, members of the Society of Friends were often imprisoned for their supposedly disruptive actions and unreasonable demands. Many of the freedoms for which they fought had become the "bulwarks of our society." Quoting the white ministers, Bell wrote that reform movements had often been "unwise and untimely" because they were the birth pains of change. People of good will often resisted reform until their consciences had overwhelmed their interests, he wrote. America needed honest and mature communication and a willingness to pursue friendships among all people who reflected a common faith in God. King's *Letter* furthered such efforts and was an eloquent expression of his

⁷⁶ An accompanying press release noted that the *Letter* had been written by King in "longhand on April 16 in his jail cell." American Friends Service Committee Press Release by Frederick Echelmeyer, May 28, 1963, AFSCA.

nonviolent, direct action approach to transform the society."⁷⁷

On June 12, the liberal protestant weekly magazine Christian Century offered the first complete reproduction of the manuscript in a media outlet. The *Letter from Birmingham Jail* had come to the attention of the editor, Harold E. Fey, in mimeographed form and he arranged to publish the document in full. On May 22, Fey had written King and mentioned using a revised version of the *Letter* for reproduction in the magazine. Fey preferred to omit the names of the eight white ministers to broaden the impact of King's remarks because they applied to "all of us to a considerable degree." The editor clearly hoped to make the *Letter's* "impact as effective as possible" by appealing for contributions to the SCLC. Fey considered his editorial tasks an honor and privilege to help sustain King's "message and ministry to the churches of America."⁷⁸ In the June issue of the magazine, Fey wrote that the *Letter* was much more than a reply to eight clergymen who claimed Dr. King was disturbing the peace. The document spoke to everyone "concerning a crisis that involves us all." Fey and the Christian Century published the epistle to contribute to racial justice and to help heal "a most grievous

⁷⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter From Birmingham Jail," published by American Friends Service Committee, May 1963, BPLDAM.

⁷⁸ Harold Fey to Martin Luther King, Jr., May 22, 1963, letter in possession of Dean Peerman, Chicago, Illinois.

wound which this nation is inflicting upon herself." The editor suggested readers wishing to offer tangible help, send checks to the SCLC. Several years later, Fey wrote King that the *Letter* had been the most memorable article to appear in the magazine during his editorship.⁷⁹

On June 15, the Saturday Evening Post published a few excerpts from the *Letter* in a lengthy and rather unflattering story on King, entitled the "Apostle of Crisis," written by Reese Cleghorn. Cleghorn noted that King had addressed the *Letter* to seven leading religious leaders (suggesting he had obtained the mimeographed, Boutwell version), who had openly criticized the civil rights leader and "staked their prestige and positions upon a moderate solution in Birmingham." King had answered with a public letter later dubbed by his staff: "Birmingham Jail Treatise of Martin Luther King Jr." The Post reporter believed the King composition further separated the civil rights leader from the southern white moderates and suggested blacks now charted their own destiny. Much more than a treatise, Cleghorn noted, the document sounded like a "declaration of black independence in the civil-rights crises of the future."⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Christian Century, June 12, 1963; James F. Findlay, "Religion and Politics in the Sixties: The Churches and the Civil Rights Act of 1964," Journal of American History, 77 (June 1990): 70n.

⁸⁰ Reese Cleghorn, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Apostle of Crisis," Saturday Evening Post, June 15, 1963, pp. 15-19.

Through the efforts of an unnamed friend closely associated with the SCLC, the editors of the left of center publication, the New Leader, discovered King's prison epistle during the summer. Intrigued by the arguments involved, executive editor Myron Kolatch phoned King and secured permission to run the full text. The *Letter* appeared in the June 24 issue. More so than any other publication, the editors clearly stated the arguments of the moderate white clergy. These ministers, the editor believed, had reflected a nationwide anxiety over violence and a desire for blacks to achieve equality more peacefully. During King's "enforced respite," the civil rights leader authored a response to the white ministers which Kolatch believed was "one of the most important documents to come from the pen of a Negro leader, especially in a time pervaded by ambivalence. . . ." In 1988, Kolatch estimated that the New Leader had sold close to three thousand reprints of the *Letter* per year.⁸¹

In Birmingham, SCLC staffers circulated a copy of the *Letter* throughout the black churches during May. On July 30, the Birmingham News printed the first mention of the *Letter* in the city's white press. Although unnamed, the eight clergymen were described as sympathetic with King's aims, but deploring the methods used.⁸²

⁸¹ New Leader, June 24, 1963 and April 4, 1988.

⁸² Birmingham News, July 30, 1963.

During August and September 1963, media outlets published the *Letter* extensively as pre- and post-publicity for the March on Washington held on August 28. The Atlantic Monthly published the document under the headline "The Negro Is Your Brother." Ebony editors enthusiastically described King's message to the white Alabama clergy as a modern classic. The *Letter* was highly popular among print editors, because King's oral rhetoric had swayed so many people through personal appearances, television, and radio. The *Letter* simply served as an eloquent written sermon.⁸³

As the prison epistle gained notice among various media outlets, Stanley Levison worried that King might lose control of the copyright. The civil rights leader told Levison he had circulated the document and allowed publication because he believed it would not hurt sales of a proposed book on the Birmingham movement. During early May, noted radical attorney William Kunstler had proposed seizing on the events in Birmingham by quickly publishing a book centered around the *Letter*. Kunstler originally wanted to author the book with the proceeds sent to a non-profit organization, but Levison, always seeking ways to promote King's image, vetoed these ideas in favor of a King-authored book and the civil rights leader's control of all royalties. Levison stated that King had a difficult time living on his salary from the SCLC and he

⁸³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Negro Is Your Brother," Atlantic Monthly, August 1963, p. 78; Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Letter From Birmingham Jail," Ebony, August 1963.

hoped the book would provide financial security. Levison considered Kunstler an opportunist who simply wanted a piece of the action and had taken advantage of King with a shady book deal. The New York attorney had to scrap Kunstler's deal and secure a book contract for King with a major New York publishing house.⁸⁴

Levison used the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* as the best way to sell the book idea. The attorney told associates that King might expand the *Letter* by ten pages and then "expound" the document further in the book.⁸⁵ Since Levison was using the document as way to receive a book contract, he told King on May 23 that publishers considering the book might be influenced negatively if they discovered the document was showing up in newspapers and magazines all over the country. King admitted he had sent copies of the document to the Christian Century and to Ebony. The civil rights leader supposed he could stop publication. Levison emphasized that

⁸⁴ *The King-Levison File*, Stanley Levison phone call to Martin Luther King, May 18, 1963, p. 1; *The King-Levison File*, Martin Luther King phone call to Stanley Levison, May 19, 1963, pp. 1-3; *The King-Levison File*, Jack O'Dell phone call to Stanley Levison, May 19, 1963, pp. 1-2; *The King-Levison File*, Martin Luther King phone call to Stanley Levison, May 21, 1963, pp. 4-5; *The King-Levison File*, Martin Luther King phone call to Stanley Levison, May 23, 1963, pp. 1-2.

⁸⁵ *The King-Levison File*, Stanley Levison phone call to Clarence Jones, May 24, 1963, pp. 1-2.

by incorporating the *Letter* in a book he hoped to secure the copyright.⁸⁶

The next day, Levison received news that King's book agent Joan Daves had received a commitment from New America Publishers for the book on Birmingham. The director of the New York publishing house, Victor Wainright, read the *Letter* and told Levison the main theme behind King's document had been the explanation of why blacks could no longer wait for moderate change. The publisher suggested "Why We Can't Wait" as the title for the expanded book version of the *Letter*. Levison believed this phrase expressed the "issue of the hour" and the public would buy the book to find out the answer to the question. In addition, Wainright gave King permission to resume circulating the *Letter* among the various media outlets.⁸⁷

The most widely circulated and reprinted version of the *Letter* appeared in King's book on Birmingham: Why We Can't Wait published in 1964. King admitted that he had indulged in the "author's prerogative" and polished the document for this publication.⁸⁸ In fact, the civil rights leader had scarcely written any of the text for the book—relying instead on a series of ghostwriters and editors. In the editing process,

⁸⁶ *The King-Levison File*, Martin Luther King phone call to Stanley Levison, May 23, 1963, pp. 1-2.

⁸⁷ *The King-Levison File*, Stanley Levison phone call to Martin Luther King, May 24, 1963, p. 1.

⁸⁸ King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 78.

King and ghostwriters Al Duckett and Hermine Popper, added the name of Bishop Paul Hardin (who was probably inadvertently omitted as an original addressee) to the list of white ministers. Unfortunately, two of the white ministers' names were misspelled in the edited version (and all subsequent publications): The book version lists them as Rabbi Hilton Grafman instead of Milton Grafman, and Holan Harmon instead of Nolan Harmon.

The editors also combined several sentences and tightened King's prose, but did not change the substance of his argument. For example, at the end of paragraph five of the original version, King wrote: "I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time, but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative." The edited version was substantially altered: "It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative." Subsequently, most reproductions of the *Letter* used the edited version and presented it as the original. This further added to the view that King had written not only a great prison epistle, but a flawless literary masterpiece.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ King, "Letter," p. 2; King, Why We Can't Wait, p. 79.

From the outset, King and SCLC officials wrote the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* for circulation by the mass media and not as a private correspondence among Judeo-Christian leaders. To elicit press interest, SCLC associates developed a dramatic public relations strategy that led most of the general public to believe King had written the entire *Letter* in a lonely, dark jail cell. There seems to be no question that the civil rights leader and his assistants continued to work on the *Letter* long after the April 16, 1963 date on the document.

Questions of authenticity aside, the public relations campaign surrounding the *Letter* worked remarkably well. Media outlets widely published the document all over the United States. As King's stature grew in the public eye, so too did that of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. The document soon gained a reputation as the most important piece of African-American writing of the civil rights era.

CHAPTER IV

A DOUBLE EDGED SWORD: REACTION TO THE *LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL*

As the walls of segregation slowly came tumbling down in Birmingham and throughout the South, the prominence of both Martin Luther King Jr. and the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* reached new heights. No longer just the humble religious leader of a noble cause, King quickly emerged as a national hero. Likewise, the *Letter* evolved from a public relations document into a grand statement of protest literature. With King's murder in 1968, the civil rights leader rightfully took his place along side other national icons such as Kennedy, Lincoln, and Roosevelt. Consequently, many Americans began considering the *Letter* a sacred and cherished text of Biblical prominence.

The eight white clergy's reputations, on the other hand, never recovered. While they remained publicly silent on the issue, the document certainly had an impact on their personal lives and subsequent careers. They responded to the King composition and its subsequent canonization with feelings of frustration, anger, and confusion. Movement activists, the black community, the media, and those sympathetic to the civil rights agenda continued to hold the eight clergy in low esteem.

As the drama of the black struggle for equality continued to unfold in 1963 and throughout the rest of the decade,

King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* became the most penetrating essay of the civil rights era. For a people and a movement that relied almost exclusively on oral traditions and testimonies rather than written chronicles, the *Letter* served as a tangible account of the long road to freedom. For Birmingham activist John Porter, this made the *Letter* extremely important. "This gave us a sense of the spirit of the time," Porter said, "and reminded us as of where we came from and where we still must go."¹

To Birmingham civil rights leader Fred Shuttlesworth, the *Letter* was nothing new. People seeking respect and recognition often made pleas for consideration and the lifting of oppression. The document, however, fell short of summing up all of what made the civil rights movement a success. "I don't think any letter ever sums up all of our human nature," he added. "It spoke a philosophy; a beginning that led to many other things. . . . I don't think anything but the Bible covers everything. . . . No one man can write all that because no one man is God." King's *Letter* spoke with the "voice of the oppressed" to people around the world.²

¹ Porter, interview.

² Shuttlesworth, interview; Raines, My Soul Is Rested, p. 161; Shuttlesworth believed the letter should have been jointly signed by he, Abernathy, and King. "It wouldn't have taken anything for him to let me [sign]," he said, "but I guess as I look at it now . . . King deserves all the credit . . . He was the spokesman, and he was the one that God had chose to be the charismatic person for that age and you can't argue against what God does, you know?" Birmingham News, April 17, 1988.

Martin Luther King Jr. later reflected that the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* served as a catalyst for focusing international attention on the city of Birmingham. He suggested that without the document and events in Alabama, the March on Washington in August 1963 would not have been possible.³

Although the *Letter* did not appear in the media until after the end of demonstrations in Birmingham, civil rights activist Andrew Young believed the document served as the turning point for the movement in the city. The *Letter* clearly articulated the problems African-Americans faced in Birmingham, Young emphasized, and was an important rallying point for the movement. It was not enough to complain about justice. "You've got to define it," Young said, "one, two, three; state your moral case and offer your solution."⁴

After reading the *Letter*, Ralph Abernathy said he doubled efforts to "witness" in Birmingham. "I was determined that I would no longer be afraid of jail," he reflected. The civil rights leader likened the *Letter* to other great writings in American history and noted that Americans would read the document as long as the nation existed and remained free.⁵

³ "Playboy Interview: Martin Luther King, Jr.," in A Testament of Hope, p. 351.

⁴ Flip Schultke and Penelope McPhee, King Remembered (New York: Pocket Books, 1986), p. 126.

⁵ Abernathy quote in Birmingham News, April 17, 1988; Abernathy, And the Walls, p. 254.

Scholars and members of the media also compared the manuscript to significant historical writings and great public letters. The *Letter* was considered by some to be as important as Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Kennedy's inaugural address. Others likened the document to Emile Zola's 1898 public letter to the president of the French Republic defending Dreyfus, or Thomas Mann's 1937 public letter to the dean of the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Bonn.⁶

Teachers of literature and the philosophy of civil disobedience soon made extensive use of the *Letter* in high school and college classrooms throughout the country. The document also quickly appeared in numerous literary anthologies alongside the civil disobedience writings of Plato, Thomas Jefferson, and Henry David Thoreau; the religious compositions of C. S. Lewis, Paul Tillich, and St. Augustine; and the works of Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Alice Walker. Editors praised King's composition as "one of the strongest pieces" of persuasive writing to come out of twentieth century America. Other anthologists considered the *Letter* a "virtuoso performance" by a master composer of rhetorical style and tone. The document had broad appeal to all U.S. citizens who were "indifferent or hostile to the Negroes' ways of seeking freedom, or unwilling to take

⁶ James A. Colaiaco, "The American Dream Unfulfilled: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the 'Letter From Birmingham Jail.'" *Phylon* 55 (Spring 1984): 1; Haig A. and Hamida Bosmajian, The Rhetoric of the Civil-Rights Movement (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 16.

positive steps toward getting civil rights for Negroes."⁷

Through the years, entrepreneurs and enthusiastic supporters of the *Letter* contacted King and the SCLC about producing the document as a phonograph recording for the listening pleasure of both blacks and whites. In selling this idea to SCLC officials, producers emphasized that this version would help sympathetic listeners to understand the logic of the *Letter* and provide a permanent platform for King's message. At a later date, Martin Luther King did record an audio version of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. A television executive also hoped to lure King to a broadcast studio to produce a televised version of the prison epistle. The document was "inherently pictorial" and provided a "unique message on the integration blot," the television producer commented.⁸

In 1963, Composer Paul Reif set King's words to music in a lengthy choral arrangement of the *Letter*. The chorus began with a slow chanting of "Birmingham Jail . . . April sixteen . . . nineteen hundred sixty-three." The arrangement focused on the slow road to racial equality and the rebuke of

⁷ Charles Muscatine and Marlene Griffith, eds. The Borzoi College Reader, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Halsey P. Taylor and Victor N. Okada, eds. The Craft of the Essay. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich Publishers, 1977), p. 310; Richard L. Lawson, Rhetorical Guide to the Borzoi College Reader (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), pp. 84, 87.

⁸ Nicholas Wardey to Martin Luther King, Jr., June 19, 1963, SCLC Papers; Martin Gal to Martin Luther King, Jr., August 8, 1963, SCLC Papers.

gradualism. "Wait! Wait! Wait!" shouted the singers. "Wait for a more convenient season, wait!" And ended with a booming bass voice singing "I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith, Mar-tin Lut-her King." More recently, another composer, John Scully, presented an operatic version of the *Letter*.⁹

With King's murder in 1968, the *Letter* made the final transformation from an eloquent and inspiring example of protest literature into an apparent God-breathed epistle. Members of the Black Theology Project, a group of activists developing the theological implications of the black power movement, began a campaign in the 1970s to include the *Letter* as the 67th book of the Bible. Led by the Reverend Muhammed Kenyatta, the activists hoped a grassroots effort would provide a biblical version of King's epistle by the year 2000. As one civil rights activist noted, King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* "condemned you like the Bible condemns you" and compelled people to change their ways and "do the right thing."¹⁰

The symbolic target of that condemnation were the eight white clergy. Martin Luther King's rhetoric overtly and sometimes subtly condemned these religious leaders for many of

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter From A Birmingham Jail*, music by Paul Reif (New York: Seesaw Music Corporation, 1963); John Scully, "Letter from Birmingham Jail: A Narrative for Soprano and Orchestra," 1994.

¹⁰ Birmingham Post-Herald, August 11, 1979; Birmingham News, April 17, 1988.

Birmingham's sins and suggested that the white clergy, and other moderates, were African Americans' greatest stumbling block to freedom. This viewpoint emerged as the basis of most subsequent assessments of the eight ministers.

Other considerations also influenced this negative portrait of the ministers. Initially, the timing of the *Letter's* appearance in the media proved particularly vexing. The clergy had issued their public statement early in the movement, prior to massive police retaliation and before widespread public sympathy had developed for the protestors. Conversely, the *Letter* first appeared in the public realm less than two weeks following the most violent confrontations in the city. Certainly these images of Birmingham police brutality against a parade of youngsters remained fresh in the public's mind. Since few media outlets offered any explanation of the white ministers' statement or provided an appropriate context, the clergy appeared to be condemning the nonviolent protests of children, while commending the use of police dogs and fire hoses by a so-called restrained Birmingham police force.

Another problem for the white ministers was a poor and rather naive choice of words and phrases in their statement; especially the terms "law and order" and "outsider." To maintain the status quo, belligerent segregationists readily invoked the principles of law and order. By enforcing the law, the segregationist hoped to maintain the local customs of

racial separation. When the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools or in transportation terminals, segregationists simply ignored these decisions. Maintaining local customs and ignoring federal laws would help preserve order in the region, they supposed, and order clearly meant keeping blacks in their "proper" place in society. Local ordinances mandated segregation throughout most of the South and these "laws" must be enforced to maintain white supremacy at any cost, whether through intimidation, violence, vigilantism, or murder.

For belligerent segregationists, the primary impairment to law and order was the outsider. For years, segregationists loudly branded anyone challenging white supremacy a Communist inspired outside agitator. These complaints about outsiders were a disingenuous means to brand honest protest from within as treacherous un-American agitation from without. As one author noted in 1964, by charging outside interference segregationists gave the false impression that the South was a "monolithic society" of white racists.¹¹

When included in the white clergy's statement, civil rights activists recognized these expressions as racist code words with harsh and intolerant connotations. Through the years, some scholars believed the clergy's appeal simply concealed a "segregationist intent." Nevertheless, one

¹¹ Harry Golden, Introduction to A Look Down the Lonesome Road, by Ralph Creger (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964), p. ix.

northern journalist discovered that the outsider phrase was used by some white southerners as a defense against widespread northern criticism, because they felt abused and singled out. The South believed "itself to be a scape goat for the nation's ills," the newsman wrote.¹²

The eight white clergy all felt this sense of alienation, but their efforts to maintain law and order moved beyond these provincial arguments and tapped into broader national implications. They had an expectation that southerners should obey all the laws of the land to maintain civil order. "For some time," remembered Bishop George Murray, "all of us [eight clergy] had pleaded with people to obey the laws of the land. Obey the law; obey the law; obey the law; we said it over and over again. The Brown decision was now the law of the land and we urged whites to obey this. Circumventing the law undermined law and order in the region." When Martin Luther King and the SCLC began demonstrations in Birmingham, the eight clergy felt bound to speak out. "It was the same principle," Murray continued. "I saw no inconsistency as we asked Dr. King to stop parading in the streets and obey the laws against demonstrations. This would help maintain civil

¹² Judith D. Hoover, "Reconstruction of the Rhetorical Situation in 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,' " in Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse, eds. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), p. 51; newsman quote in William Peters, The Southern Temper (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), p. 267.

order and not provoke violence. He should have pursued change in the courts, not in front of television cameras."¹³

The eight moderate white ministers never understood why King insisted on bearing the cross of confrontation. Protests forcing rapid change in the social order led only to lawlessness and disorder, they supposed. A slow, gradual road to desegregation, orchestrated locally, remained their best offer to end segregation. After all, they considered King an outsider. The white clergy had an extremely narrow definition of an outsider. As Murray maintained, the ministers believed King was not an outsider to the region or even the state, but simply an outsider to (a non-citizen of) Birmingham. The ministers hoped for a solution based on the "common sense" negotiations of local leaders. Rabbi Grafman, however, later admitted the ministers' statement should have been better phrased. "We certainly didn't come out smelling like a rose," he said. Bishop Durick was more graphic, calling the statement little more than "verbal diarrhea."¹⁴

Compromise with these white ministers was never part of Martin Luther King's agenda. While seeking widespread media coverage, the civil rights leader focused on and received concessions from business leaders, rather than church leaders—relegating the role of the church to a secondary

¹³ Hoover, "Reconstruction of the Rhetorical Situation," p. 59; Murray, interview, March 1, 1991.

¹⁴ Murray, interview, March 1, 1991; Grafman, interview, March 1, 1991; Durick, interview, February 21, 1992.

consideration. The business community clearly understood the effect boycotts had on economic prosperity. "In the South, businessmen act much more quickly from economic considerations than do churchmen from moral considerations," emphasized King.¹⁵

Despite hopeful rhetoric in the *Letter*, King never had a face-to-face meeting with any of these eight ministers. He had stated in the document that he looked to a time when he would meet each of the clergy, "not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother." King, however, never sought a meeting with the white clergy, reflecting his complete dismissal of these men as effective agents of change. They were, however, worthy rhetorical targets.¹⁶

Where were the white clergy's "voices when defiance and hatred were called for by white men" who sat in their churches? King asked. The white ministers had long urged southerners to obey federal laws and raised collective and individual voices in response to "inflammatory and rebellious" segregationists. Belligerents harassed and intimidated Birmingham's leading white clergy for speaking out. Several paid the high price of losing the effectiveness of their

¹⁵ McGill, The South and the Southerner, pp. 286-87; Bailey, Southern White Protestantism, p. 148; Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Un-Christian Christian" in The White Problem in America, ed. the Editors of Ebony (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1966), p. 61.

¹⁶ King, "Letter," p. 20.

ministry and eventually their pulpits. Relatively few civil rights leaders or members of the national press recognized the precarious situation in which these eight white ministers found themselves in; between two powerful opposing forces, the black activist and the belligerent segregationist.¹⁷

Nevertheless, while the white clergy openly sought concessions from King and the SCLC, they had never truly experienced the vast injustices of segregation and never fully understood why waiting for gradual change insulted King. "Where were their voices when a black race took upon itself the cross of protest against man's injustice to man?" King asked. Resorting to demonstrations upset the white clergy's concept of law and order. For King, sacrificing order to challenge an unjust law was a small price for freedom. Neither side was willing to compromise principles.¹⁸

Many within in the movement saw no shades of gray in the quest for racial justice. With scores of unenforced laws on the books and years of broken promises, many civil rights activists developed the conviction that either whites were for them or against them. As Fred Shuttlesworth believed, if the eight white clergy had been on the "right side" of the integration issue, they would have boldly "marched with the people" in the streets of Birmingham. The civil rights leader compared these ministers and their public statements to New

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Testament Pharisees who were grandstanding before the public and judging from "high ecclesiastical and pontifical positions." It was a situation where "hell-bound, pious folks were still hell-bound," he added. He considered their public statement an unjustified, futile attempt to slow the quest for equality. "Jesus would classify" all of the eight white ministers as bigots and the religious mouthpieces of belligerent segregationists, Shuttlesworth argued. The white clergy never abided with their flock and never prayed for the people involved in the movement, he continued. Had they prayed or revealed any concern and love, they would have actively participated in the movement by marching in the streets. "They never spoke to us," the civil rights leader added. "They never encouraged me. They never prayed for me as a minister or brother. They never even spoke to me about what I was doing. They left me to the Klan. . . ." ¹⁹

By disagreeing with the SCLC's timing and methods, Birmingham civil rights activist Abraham Woods questioned whether the eight white clergy really hoped to improve race relations. "If they wanted justice and equality," Woods said, "they wanted it without plowing up the field. They wanted it without the thunder and lightning." ²⁰ Few moderates wanted such loud flashes of change in society.

¹⁹ First Shuttlesworth quote in Barr, "Rabbi Grafman and Birmingham," pp. 25; second and third Shuttlesworth quote in Shuttlesworth, interview.

²⁰ Barr, "Rabbi Grafman and Birmingham," p. 24.

In contrast, campaign participant John Porter refused to condemn the white ministers for not taking a more active role. Even getting involved as much as they did placed the eight white clergy on shaky ground. Porter said he saw "tremendous suffering" in the white pulpits of Birmingham. "Any attempt," he believed, "to address the [racial] issue from a moderate point of view and you were penalized gravely. It was a cut-and-dried issue." Belligerent segregationists carefully scrutinized the actions and rhetoric of the white clergy. "The intensity was just unbelievable," Porter said. In addition, economic considerations guided the white ministers. Porter's participation in the demonstrations did not jeopardize his job and financial situation. The white ministers chose not to risk their livelihood by stepping forward to support the movement in words or actions, Porter believed. Any hint of deviation from "hard core segregation" was almost a "death sentence" for these clergy. "I'm convinced that all that matters is each man has to decide where he will stand," said Porter. "You cannot require everybody to stand where you stand." Birmingham's leading white clergy faced certain "death" and "crucifixion" if they became actively involved. "You have to decide at what point you are willing to die for what you believe," he said. "Nobody else can dictate that."²¹

²¹ Porter, interview; Alabama Baptist, March 18, 1993.

After reading the white clergy's statement, Ralph Abernathy recalled, King and other movement leaders were "totally surprised" that these men had such a narrow vision of racial equality. In turn, Abernathy later pondered what they had felt after reading the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Had King's arguments convinced the white clergy, or were his points dismissed as more extremism and foolishness? Were the ministers "ashamed of themselves," Abernathy wondered or had they continued to support Birmingham's violent stand against outsiders and troublemakers? "I . . . never read any subsequent statements by these gentlemen," the civil rights leader wrote, "and perhaps that said something about their ultimate thoughts on the subject."²²

The eight white clergy, however, believed the civil rights movement and the media had misrepresented their public statement and subsequently distorted their racial beliefs. At the time, most of the white clergy never made public comments about the *Letter*. After reading the document, Bishop Nolan Harmon telephoned colleague Paul Hardin and expressed feelings of deep hurt. The *Letter* was unfair and unjust, he told Hardin, and had betrayed the eight white clergy. They had promoted racial justice through moderate means and that apparently wasn't good enough for King. Hardin advised Harmon to ignore the document. "Bishop, I don't think I would touch

²² First Abernathy quote in Birmingham News, April 17, 1988; Abernathy, And the Walls, p. 256.

it," Hardin said, "there was no way in the world that you could get a hearing now; let it alone." And for the rest of their careers, the ministers did mostly "let it alone."²³

Seeing his name attached to such a stunning rebuke had surprised Nolan Harmon. The bishop believed King had simply brushed aside the white ministers' efforts to achieve a moderate solution to the racial crisis in Birmingham. The SCLC had simply "given out" the document to various media outlets as a "propaganda move" and used the names of prominent Alabama religious leaders to "give great emphasis to what he wrote—as indeed it did." The white ministers, the bishop later wrote, were "incidentally tagged" by King and the media as defiant bigots, unwilling to accept guidance or counsel. He thought King should have sent the white ministers the *Letter* first, instead of just releasing the document to the media.²⁴

Bishop Harmon considered the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* a "good one from its own standpoint." King, however, had erred in demanding an immediate solution (with no time for waiting) to all the problems of the "downtrodden black people," the bishop added. Defending the gradualist position, Harmon later wrote that integration was going to take more time than the *Letter* demanded—as it "surely did." The

²³ Hardin, interview.

²⁴ Harmon, *Ninety Years*, pp. 298-99; *Birmingham News*, June 5, 1989.

ministers recognized this as did "other sensible people." The document aided King's quest for national prominence, Harmon believed, but helped few people in Birmingham. King won his battles in the northern newspapers but he lost his war in the South where it needed to be won, he added.²⁵

Bishop Harmon continued to speak out against violations of his sacred concept of law and order, whether by segregationists or integrationists. When Alabama governor George Wallace made a symbolic stand in the schoolhouse door against integration at the University Alabama in June 1963, Harmon stood before the Annual Conference in Birmingham and read a public protest. Neither segregationist governors nor civil rights activists had the right to defy the law, the bishop underscored. Harmon regretted that Wallace had attempted to "defy the sovereignty of the United States" and deny fundamental human rights. Such an attempt was a "moral mistake" and a "political blunder" (although it never harmed Wallace's career). The church had no business directing the affairs of state, but the church had to speak out when state leaders injured the "God given rights of any man." Harmon received several hateful letters and a few Methodist churchgoers quit the denomination over his stand; including a Birmingham firefighter, injured during the civil rights

²⁵ Ibid. Methodist Christian Advocate, June 11, 1963.

demonstrations. Nevertheless, most of the Methodist clergy in the conference supported the bishop.²⁶

Harmon, however, had little support when he confronted the circulation of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* at the Chicago meeting of the United Methodist General Board of Christian Social Concerns in August 1963. When delegates received a copy of the *Letter* in an official information packet, Harmon believed the group had allowed two Methodist bishops (Hardin and himself) to be characterized as "obstacles to all justice and freedom." Within hours, Harmon sent a forceful statement to the conference expressing anger that an official agency of the church had distributed the document without notifying Harmon and Hardin or truly understanding the situation in Birmingham. The Board of Social Concerns had long called for justice and fairness to all, but Harmon asked

what of the fairness of placarding publicly the names of two of its own Bishops, two say nothing of the other religious leaders, without making any attempt to reach them or to find out from other than newspaper reports the exact situation in Alabama—what had happened before our statement was issued and what happened afterward as the result of not heeding our warning?²⁷

Harmon believed that the movement in Birmingham made the hard-core segregationists more militant and embittered the moderates and "People of good will," upon whom depended the ultimate solution to the racial problems. Harmon further added that King's *Letter* was unfair to all eight of the white

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Harmon, statement, Harmon Papers.

clergy and the Methodist board had moved toward "deplorable irresponsibility" by distributing the document. "Keep your balance, brethren," Harmon warned, "be careful what you do, and be as fair to your own as you want them to be fair to others."²⁸

In response, the Chicago conference leaders defended the *Letter's* distribution, because the document had so admirably "shed light upon the complexities of contemporary human relations." The conference also affirmed the "well known" sincerity, integrity, and Christian leadership Harmon and Hardin had shown in the cause of racial justice. Harmon scoffed, considering this only a poor excuse for an apology.²⁹

Bishop Paul Hardin offered no remorse for the white clergy's stand against the Birmingham demonstrations. Hardin maintained that the ministers had only asked King to postpone the protests and wait for the new city government to make good on election promises. King chose the names of the eight clergy, Hardin added, and addressed the *Letter* to the only religious leaders in Alabama bold enough to act openly to "make the situation better" A surprising move, he believed, since there was not a "single segregationist" in the group. Hardin said he initially thought the *Letter* was a joke and never had a "twinge of conscience" about King's arguments. The bishop insisted that his entire ministry in Birmingham and

²⁸ Methodist Christian Advocate, September 3, 1963.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Harmon, Ninety Years, pp. 299-300.

in South Carolina contradicted the impression the document gave. "I don't think that he meant to take advantage of a situation," Hardin reflected, "but he saw . . . the names of men who were prominent in the religious life of Birmingham and the state of Alabama and he wanted to address that letter to that type of person, people who were well known. In a measure, I never really felt badly toward him for it. . . ."³⁰

Edward Ramage quietly read the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* for the first time in his study at First Presbyterian Church. He told his assistant pastor, William Ford, that King's composition seemed "just about like getting a letter from St. Paul." Ramage supposed the *Letter* would be the one thing in his life he would be remembered for. Still, the Presbyterian minister insisted that had King delayed the demonstrations during the spring of 1963 and allowed the Boutwell administration to take control, the movement would have received a peaceful reception.³¹

Before he finally tracked down a copy of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Earl Stallings had heard plenty of rumors about a widely published correspondence bearing his name. Stallings, however, later recalled that he had no "particular reaction" to the document. "I felt he had made a clear

³⁰ Hardin, interview.

³¹ Reverend William Warner Ford, telephone conversation with author, September 9, 1995.

presentation of what he thought were the facts," the minister added. John Chandler, the minister of music at Stallings's First Baptist, believed the eight ministers realized that Martin Luther King had tremendous public relations skills and was a master communicator. "King used the ministers to his full advantage," Chandler said.³²

Rabbi Milton Grafman considered the *Letter* a beautiful yet vicious document. "He [King] did us an injustice," Grafman told his congregation in 1963, "and said things that hurt us." The Rabbi believed anyone reading the *Letter* would think the white ministers were eight bigots. Grafman felt bitter and resentful that King unjustly "pilloried" the white clergy. The ministers were placed in the position of "looking to posterity" as if they opposed King's goals rather than the timing of the demonstrations, Grafman said. The rabbi insisted the ministers fully supported the goals of the movement.³³

As with most of the ministers, Grafman received a fury of excoriating letters from all over the country. Again the timing of the *Letter's* appearance before the public played a significant role in the severity of these letters. One writer from New York suggested that Grafman had turned his back on the spirit of the Passover and the Jews of the Holocaust. He

³² Chandler, conversation; Earl Stallings, letter to author, July 11, 1995.

³³ Grafman, Rosh Hashanah Sermon; Grafman, interview, August 19, 1977.

hoped Grafman would reconsider his misguided position and, despite the difficult atmosphere of the Deep South, would positively lead his congregation and his neighbors in the "directions illuminated by our heritage both as Jews and Americans." Another writer was completely "ashamed and disgusted" with Judaism after she read the statement by the "supposed" white religious leaders. "How can you dare to give religious teaching to others when you yourself are untrue to God and his teachings?" she asked. The writer supposed Grafman's values had been so distorted from living in the South, that he remained unable to distinguish good from bad. She believed the white ministers' praise of the Birmingham police for their "calm manner" was akin to "thanking the Gestapo for efficiently carrying out Hitler's orders." Other correspondents described their shame at being a member of a religion in which Rabbi Grafman "pretended" to be a spiritual leader. "Your agreement with and participation in this official attitude is a disgrace to your temple, to your religion and, if it makes any difference to you, to your God," one enraged Jew wrote.³⁴

Bishop Joseph A. Durick recognized that King had used the ministers as a "sounding board" to justify his use of nonviolent civil disobedience and to silence critics throughout the country. "I felt certain," Durick later wrote,

³⁴ Phillip L. Bereano to Grafman, May 19, 1963, Grafman Papers; Betty Norwind to Grafman, May 19, 1963, Grafman Papers; Gabe Sumner to Grafman, May 20, 1963, Grafman Papers.

"that he had a much broader scope of intended readers than my fellow clergymen and myself." Regardless, Durick also claimed the *Letter* made a significant impact upon his racial outlook. King had written in a language that was "gentle with us," he later reflected. "Loving, but his soft words were painful to me. I had seen segregation as wrong, but not as he had portrayed it." The powerful message of the *Letter* had "hit home" and moved Durick to take a more liberal role in fighting for racial justice.³⁵

After first reading the *Letter*, Bishop George Murray found King's arguments quite perplexing. Murray contended the ministers' statement specifically addressed local black leaders, not King. Here was a real "smart guy," the bishop remembered, quoting scripture against us and answering a statement written to someone else. In the *Letter*, King attributed motives to the white ministers which Murray insisted they never had and in turn, created "straw men" out of the eight clergymen. Murray also told President John F. Kennedy during a meeting in the fall of 1963, that King's *Letter* had "seriously misconstrued both our statement and our intention."³⁶

³⁵ Durick interview, May 8, 1992; Durick to Thomas J. Elliott, January 26, 1971, Durick Papers; Tennessee Register, July 4, 1994; New York Times, July 28, 1994.

³⁶ Birmingham News, April 17, 1988; Murray, interview, March 1, 1991; Alabama File, Presidential Briefing Paper, Birmingham Crisis, September 1963, Burke Marshall Papers, copies in BPLDAM.

Bishop Murray doubted the white ministers and King would ever find common ground in Birmingham. King insisted that mass demonstrations were the only way to achieve much delayed equality. "We felt the demonstrations were unnecessary," Murray maintained, "and that the city was in a process of making progress." Birmingham's moderate white clergy tried to meet with King face-to-face before and after his arrest. King declined to confront the clergy personally, instead he sent a representative to talk with them. King's emissary told the white clergy that if they wanted to lend support, they needed to join the demonstrations. "If we would do that," Murray said, "that was great. They'd welcome us. If we were there [meeting] for any other purpose—like compromise—then they told us we might as well go home. . . ." This greatly distressed the white ministers seeking open dialogue. "I wonder if groups in opposition really try to understand one another," Murray pondered. "I think the church ought to perform this reconciling function—to provide a place and opportunity for these groups to come together and talk." Nonetheless, Bishop Murray was glad King achieved his goal in Birmingham. "They were my objectives too," he said, "but I would still object to the tactics used."³⁷

copies in BPLDAM.

³⁷ First Murray quote in Murray interview, March 1, 1991; second Murray quote in Alabama Churchman, March 1969; third Murray quote in Barr, "Rabbi Grafman and Birmingham," p. 29.

After reading King's *Letter*, Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter turned to Bishop Murray and aptly described the frustration of many moderates: "This is what you get when you try to do something. You get it from both sides. George, you just have to live with that." Such criticism never bothered Carpenter. A year earlier in his annual bishop's address, Carpenter had spoken of such matters at the Diocesan Convention when he urged those present to be "critics of criticism," learning what criticism to accept or reject. "If criticism is unfair we must keep from irritation," he exhorted; if untrue, ignore it; if well founded, "profit by it."³⁸ The eight white clergy addressed in Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* were viewed in the public eye as bigots and racists. Although used in an impersonal public relations campaign by the SCLC, each of the ministers had an intensely personal response to the King document. They all felt they had been used and misrepresented by the movement and the media. Conversely, those sympathetic to King and his tactics widely hailed the *Letter from Birmingham Jail* as a tremendous literary effort. The legends surrounding King and the *Letter* continued to grow through the years, manifesting a romanticized view of the entire movement. As activist Ella Baker once noted, "The movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement." Fred Shuttlesworth was more specific,

³⁸ Branch, Parting the Waters, p. 745; Alabama Churchman, July 1962.

believing the events in Birmingham made the SCLC and Dr. King. ". . . King's name never would touch immortality had it not been for Birmingham," he said. Notwithstanding, a sympathetic media helped to make the movement a success in Birmingham and the subsequent heroic myths surrounding King transformed his *Letter* into a sacred epistle.³⁹

³⁹ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 625; Raines, My Soul is Rested, p. 161.

CHAPTER V

BIRMINGHAM AND THE PRISON EPISTLE: A BOUNTY FOR THE
MOVEMENT AND A BURDEN FOR THE EIGHT WHITE CLERGY

There was little doubt that the events in Birmingham during the spring of 1963 had a tremendous impact upon the national psyche. The demonstrations and subsequent violence in Alabama's largest city brought civil rights to the forefront of the nation's conscience and even prompted President John F. Kennedy to call the issue a moral dilemma. The year 1963 and on into 1964 emerged as Martin Luther King's finest hours. He had succeeded in his quest to focus the media's attention upon the injustices of southern segregation, as well as to gain publicity for the movement and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The publicity campaign, however, brought few joys to the white clergy addressed in King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Within eighteen months of the demonstrations, only three of the eight religious leaders remained in Birmingham and by the 1970s only one continued to work in the city.

Even with the end of organized street demonstrations in Birmingham on May 10, 1963, tensions remained high. On Saturday May 12, bombs exploded at the Gaston Motel and at the home of King's brother, A. D. Although no one was seriously injured, frustrated and angry blacks rioted in the streets for several hours. Individually, the eight clergy pleaded for calm in the city. Bishop Durick condemned the bombing as a

gross injustice to the victims and an insult to all citizens of goodwill. "May the wisdom of God guide us all to a true spirit of justice," the Catholic leader prayed.¹

Earl Stallings blamed Birmingham's white churches for much of the climate of unrest in the city. By choosing to remain silent in the wake of increasing violence, the white churches had now become part of the racial problem, he believed. The Southern Baptist minister rebuked white Christians and Jews for providing little meaningful leadership during the crisis. He also condemned the black community for contributing to the rising tensions by submitting to outside and irresponsible leadership (presumably King and the SCLC). "Let us pray earnestly for all men, and ask Almighty God for peace and understanding," Stallings said.²

Despite the actions of belligerents, the city's slow and sometimes painful process of dismantling the old system began. On May 23, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled that Boutwell and the new city council were Birmingham's rightful government. With legitimate authority, the council asked Boutwell to appoint a special advisory committee to ease the transition from a segregated to an integrated society. Department stores in downtown Birmingham integrated fitting rooms by May 14 and removed "colored only" signs over restrooms and water

¹ Edward Lamonte, Politics and Welfare in Birmingham (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), pp. 185-86; Birmingham News, May 13, 1963.

² Ibid.

fountains during June (unfortunately the signs remained in city hall for several more months). By July, the city council unanimously repealed all of Birmingham's segregation ordinances—effectively ending the legal wall of separation between the races. By the end of the month, downtown merchants began serving blacks at lunch counters.³

On several fronts, King and the SCLC publicity machine had achieved a tremendous public relations victory. The constant stream of *free* media coverage, combined with highly organized public relations and fund raising campaigns, infused the SCLC with much needed cash. Prior to the movement in Birmingham (between September 1, 1962 and March 31, 1963), the SCLC raised \$198,878.62. Subsequently, from April 1, 1963 until August 31, 1963, the civil rights organization took in \$542,774.09—much of the money (over 31 percent) came from direct appeal letters. During July and August 1963, contributors received a free copy of the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.⁴

Nevertheless, SCLC officials also had a much broader public relations goal with the Birmingham campaign. A supporter in Los Angeles held up a sign at a SCLC rally: "Birmingham is everywhere." As King had hoped, Alabama's

³ Ibid. Corley, "The Quest," pp. 276-78.

⁴ SCLC Financial Report, 1962-1963, SCLC Papers; 30 percent of the money came from rallies, 27.8 came from contributions, 6.7 came from concerts, 1.7 came from churches and organizations, 1.8 came from the convention, and 0.4 percent came from book sales.

largest city emerged as the symbol of racism in America. The SCLC had set out to spread the news of Birmingham's injustices across the nation, SCLC associate Bernard Lee recalled. "We wanted the nation to know," Lee said, "to see, what it was like to be black in segregated Birmingham."⁵ The television and newspaper pictures showed this as did King's vivid writings in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

The successes in Birmingham led to new demonstrations and arrests across the South: including those in Jackson, Mississippi; Savannah, Georgia; Raleigh, North Carolina; and Danville, Virginia. By August 1963, the Justice Department reported that 758 demonstrations in 186 cities had occurred during the ten weeks after Birmingham. The Southern Regional Council further illustrated that between April 1 and November 1, 1963, desegregation had occurred in at least 261 cities and counties in eleven states. The prospect of Birmingham-type demonstrations (and all the negative publicity that came with it) compelled many white southern politicians to take positive steps in ending segregation.⁶

Direct action had even spread into the North, as protestors marched in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit and other cities. With demonstrations occurring so close to home, voices of moderation began speaking out in northern

⁵ Nichols, "Cities," p. 281.

⁶ "Birmingham and Beyond," New South 18 (October-November 1963), pp. 19-20.

cities—the same voices who probably scorned the cries of moderation from white southerners. As one journalist sarcastically noted, northerners found it much easier to deal with racial injustice in their own backyard by dispatching writers, moralists, lawyers, magistrates, and troops to the South and Birmingham.⁷

The civil rights issue took center stage for Americans in 1963. Public opinion polling revealed a 40 percent jump in Americans who thought civil rights was an important issue and a 30 percent leap in those favoring civil rights legislation. The Washington Post reported that Birmingham was the best proof of the need for more legislation to protect the rights of all citizens. Prior to the activities in Alabama, President John F. Kennedy had submitted a civil rights bill to Congress on February 23, 1963. A coalition of southern Democrats and conservative Republicans had stymied action and the bill had fallen prey to the apathy many white Americans felt toward the civil rights issue. "There wasn't any interest in it," Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy said. "There was no public demand for it. There was no demand by the newspapers or television. There was no interest by people coming to watch the hearings. . . . Nobody came. Nobody paid any attention."⁸ Birmingham, however, changed all of that.

⁷ Ibid; National Review, May 28, 1963.

⁸ Nichols, "Cities," p. 299; Washington Post, May 12, 1963; Kennedy quote in Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy, p. 328.

All of the publicity surrounding the Birmingham movement had also boosted King's personal appeal and lifted his image to new heights of prestige. More than ever, the civil rights leader had become a "media magnet" and a public hero. Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall believed King craved this personal success as well a general success for segregated blacks. "It was partly cynical," Marshall said, "and it was partly sincere."⁹

Regardless of Marshall's assessment, an American public and a press hungry for information on King, placed the civil rights leader in constant demand as a speaker and a writer. King's finest moment was his "I Have A Dream" speech, delivered at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963 in front of over two hundred thousand people and a national television audience. Many who had seen the dramatic television footage of Birmingham or read King's eloquent *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, tuned in to hear the civil rights leader's oration. In many ways the "Dream" speech echoed broad themes from King's prison composition, particularly the abstract and concrete uses of time. In the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial, King proclaimed: "We have . . . come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now." There was no time to "engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism." Now was

⁹ Washington Post, May 12, 1963; Miller, Voice of Deliverance, p. 10; Burke Marshall, interview by Anthony Lewis, June 20, 1964, John F. Kennedy Library.

the time for change and Martin Luther King had the dream of an integrated America.¹⁰

While King continued to reap the rewards of the Birmingham movement and the Washington march, tensions in Alabama's largest city remained high through the summer and into the fall of 1963. In September, the city faced a federal court order to desegregate three public schools—Ramsey, West End High, and Graymont Elementary. Governor Wallace again bellowed defiant rhetoric; the Kennedy administration applied pressure; and Mayor Boutwell sought yet another compromise. The white ministers publicly called for peaceful compliance with the desegregation orders. Bishop Joseph Durick called this a testing period for Birmingham citizens to show the world that the city of fear, violence, and hatred was now "clothed in dignity, charity, and justice." Soon afterward, however, dynamite rocked the home of civil rights attorney Arthur Shores, touching off a series of demonstrations and riots.¹¹

Once again the eight moderate clergy called for calm in the city. On September 7 they issued another public statement, again calling for "law and order and common sense"

¹⁰ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, p. 283; J. Robert Cox, "The Fulfillment of Time: King's 'I have a Dream' Speech (August 28, 1963)," in Texts in Context: Critical Dialogues on Significant Episodes in American Political Rhetoric, eds. Michael C. Leff and Fred J. Kauffeld (Davis, California: Hermangoras Press, 1989), pp. 194-95.

¹¹ Catholic Week, September 3, 1963.

in dealing with the racial crisis in Birmingham. The ministers believed the bombing was a "dastardly act" which had endangered the safety of the community and "rekindled anew a potentially explosive situation." The clergy, however looked to citizens and public officials of "good will, intelligence, and respect" to resolve the crisis with dignity and in compliance with the will of the courts. Everyone must cooperate to restore peace and assure the continuity of public education. "We beseech the prayers of all children of God and men of good will in this mutual crisis," they wrote. God would judge the defiant actions of those not acting peacefully and prayerfully in Birmingham, warned the ministers.¹²

Belligerents, however, ignored the ministers' pleas. A week later on Sunday, September 15, a bomb rocked the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church—killing four young black girls. The event shook the nation and made for another week of extremely negative media coverage for Birmingham. Bishop Durick invited the city's pastors, priests, and rabbis to meet and then attend the girls' funeral en masse at John Porter's Sixth Avenue Baptist Church. Porter met the ministers at a southside church and led the group on an impromptu march to his church some two blocks away. The irony of the event was not lost on Durick, who realized the white ministers, many dressed in robes and regalia, were marching just like the

¹² Catholic Week, September 13, 1963; the new Presbyterian moderator John M. Crowell replaced Ramage; see Appendix.

"unwise and untimely" civil rights demonstrators. The eight white ministers joined eight hundred city pastors of both races at the funeral—the largest interracial gathering of clergy in the city's history. "I felt great joy in seeing the togetherness of leaders of the religious community," recalled Porter, "but great sadness that it took this event to bring us together."¹³

Martin Luther King returned to deliver the eulogy. The civil rights leader called the young girls "martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity." As in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, King continued to attack the forces of moderation, complacency, and gradualism in the white and black communities. The young girls' lives had something to say to every minister who had "remained silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows." All blacks and whites must substitute courage for caution. The four little girls "say to us," King continued, "that we must be concerned not merely about WHO murdered them, but about the system, the way of life and the philosophy which PRODUCED the murders." Their death announced to the country that everyone must work

¹³ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, p. 892; Paul Hemphill, *Leaving Birmingham: Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Viking Press, 1993), pp. 162-63; Durick, interview, February 21, 1992; Porter quote in Barr, "Rabbi Grafman and Birmingham," p. 37.

"passionately and unrelentingly" to fulfill the American dream.¹⁴

Soon after the bombing, Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall suggested that the clergy travel to Washington and discuss the racial situation in Birmingham with President John F. Kennedy. Two other groups also met with the president, black civil rights leaders (including King), and representatives of the white economic elite. Father Joseph C. Allen accompanied Bishops Durick, Murray, and Harmon, the Reverend Stallings, and Rabbi Grafman on the trip to Washington.¹⁵

On Monday afternoon, September 23, 1963 the group assembled at the "G" Street Episcopal Church in Washington, where Harmon's friend Charles Kean served as rector. Kean had been called away from the church, but his secretary welcomed the clergymen into the minister's study. Durick rubbed his face and realized he needed a shave after the long trip. He borrowed the Rabbi's razor and went to a small basin in the back of the study and shaved. Harmon commented on the strange ecumenical sight: a Catholic leader shaving with a rabbi's razor in an Episcopalian's basin, while a Southern Baptist preacher and a Methodist bishop watched. Afterwards, the

¹⁴ King, "Eulogy for the Martyred Children," in A Testament of Hope, pp. 221-23.

¹⁵ Birmingham News, September 24, 1963.

nervous group walked down the street to the White House for the 7 p.m. meeting.¹⁶

The clergy gathered in a semi-circle around President Kennedy, as he swayed gently in his rocking chair. Kennedy encouraged the ministers to further racial progress in Birmingham and to bring the "moral strength of religion to bear on this issue." Each of the ministers conveyed to the president their ideas for easing tensions in the city. Bishop Murray spoke first and described the difficulty in supporting improved race relations in the face of harassing midnight phone calls, hate-filled letters, and other forms of persecution. Several white Birmingham ministers had to contend with divided congregations and the loss of an effective leadership role in the community. The majority of white citizens in Birmingham were law abiding and intended to obey court decisions. Nevertheless, a "lawless minority" remained so vocal and used such extreme measures, that the law abiding majority remained silent. Murray blamed both Governor Wallace and the civil rights demonstrators for fostering a climate of mistrust between blacks and whites.¹⁷

After Murray finished, the president turned to Durick and said: "Okay bishop, you're next." In the seating arrangement,

¹⁶ Harmon, Ninety Years, p. 299.

¹⁷ Durick interview, February 21, 1992; Father Joseph Allen, telephone conversation with author, January 28, 1993; Alabama File, Presidential Briefing Paper, Birmingham Crisis, Marshall Papers.

Durick should have been last to make comments. "I thought it was a nice gesture," remembered Durick. "Of course, he was Catholic and so was I and I'm sure that didn't hurt any, but I thought it was a nice gesture just the same." Bishop Durick told the president how each of the white ministers believed that racial discrimination was wrong, "whenever and wherever" practiced. The Catholic leader placed much of the blame for racial problems in Birmingham upon the youthful shallowness of the city. Entrepreneurs founded the city only ninety years before and this, the bishop believed, accounted for the failure to appraise the social, political, and economic problems of segregation. Perhaps Birmingham was too young to admit a reluctance to "embrace the challenge of integration." The city desperately needed an infusion of new magic and a miracle of renewal for the Magic City's black citizenry. The Catholic leader asked President Kennedy to send African-American FBI agents to Birmingham to improve relations between the black community and law enforcement officials. The bishop also encouraged Kennedy to use his influence with the Reverend Billy Graham to organize an ecumenical, interracial revival in the city. During the 1964 Easter season, Graham preached to

a large interracial gathering at Birmingham's Legion Field.¹⁸

Harmon, Stallings, and Grafman each took turns explaining their views of the racial situation in Birmingham. When Rabbi Grafman began a diatribe against Martin Luther King, Kennedy interrupted and reminded the clergy that they should be thankful King, not SNCC, was demonstrating in Birmingham. "SNCC has got an investment in violence," said the president. "They're sons of bitches."¹⁹ Kennedy had scheduled only a half hour with the ministers but he kept the group an hour.

When the six clergy emerged from the White House, a flock of reporters asked for a public statement. Suspicious of the national press, the group had selected the eloquent and unflappable Bishop Murray to speak on everyone's behalf. Murray told the reporters that he and his fellow clergy met from time-to-time to "consider racial problems in our city" and often issued public statements "which we thought might be helpful." The ministers had a pleasant meeting with JFK, the bishop added, and he hoped that "some good may come of it."

¹⁸ Notes for White House Meeting, September 23, 1963, Durick Papers; Durick, interview, May 8, 1992; William Martin: A Prophet With Honor: The Billy Graham Story (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), p. 312; Billy Graham held an integrated United Evangelistic Rally on Easter Sunday 1964. Threats of violence limited the crowd to thirty-five thousand in the sixty-thousand plus Legion Field football stadium. The crowd, about fifty-fifty white-black, listened Graham's sermon: "The Great Reconciliation."

¹⁹ Garrow, Bearing the Cross, pp. 296, 678n6; Durick interview, January 28, 1993; Allen, telephone conversation.

When asked for more specifics, the Episcopal leader stonewalled and told the media representatives that it was not his place to reveal what the president had discussed in the Oval Office. After badgering the ministers for a few minutes, the reporters finally gave up in disgust. One reporter hoped that the religious leaders' actions in Birmingham would be "more eloquent" than their "words at the White House door."²⁰

After the White House gathering, the group agreed to eat dinner at a swanky Washington restaurant. A still trembling and sweat-soaked Earl Stallings, however, remained so overwrought from meeting the president, he excused himself and took a shower in his hotel room to cool off. On social occasions, Durick and his sidekick Father Joe Allen often enjoyed sharing a scotch and soda and discussing eclectic topics ranging from University of Alabama football to banal poetry. But on this trip, Durick and Allen out of respect for the other men in the group decided in advance not to order drinks at dinner. When the waiter queried the group about drink orders, however, each man turned down the offer, except Allen, who thought he really needed a drink after the excitement of the day. The double cross really surprised Durick and the Protestant on lookers. Bishop Harmon, however, acted as peacemaker and said: "The Lord certainly drank wine and in fact manufactured a lot of wine at that wedding feast."

²⁰ Murray, et. al, statement, Durick Papers; Birmingham News, September 24, 1963.

Harmon quietly told Allen he had never dined with anyone drinking an alcoholic beverage. Allen quipped to the Methodist sage, it was fortunate he wasn't living in Christ's day, for he could not have attended the Last Supper. Flabbergasted by the young priest, Harmon slid back in his chair as Allen sipped his refreshment and flashed a wry grin and a wink at Durick.²¹

Back in Birmingham, African-American leaders again pressed for open communication between the races (a long delayed part of the May 10 accord between the SCLC and the white establishment). Finally, Boutwell announced the formation of the Group Relations Committee made up of nine blacks and sixteen whites. Bishop Carpenter was selected chairman. Rabbi Grafman and Bishop Durick served as committee members, along with several black ministers: J. L. Ware (serving as vice chairman), Edward Gardner, and Abraham Woods. During the organizational meeting, Bishop Carpenter told the committee that "prejudice should be parked at the door and an effort made for genuine understanding." He further charged the group with the "instant goals of improving racial communications and understanding." Regardless, Carpenter still looked to an ultra-gradualist solution to the racial problems in the city. "Come on fellows," he told the committee, "let's get in here and kick the ball around a

²¹ Durick, interview, May 8, 1992; Allen, telephone conversation.

little bit, but I don't want any of you picking it up and running with it."²²

At one of the committee's first meetings, held in city hall, Reverend Ware complained of "For White Men Only" signs hanging on the restroom doors. Ware said he looked for the "colored" facility, but found none. The black minister considered going through the white only door, but feared what the police might do if they found him in there. The committee passed a unanimous resolution calling for all "white" and "colored" signs to be removed from city hall. These symbols of the old system were finally removed by the end of 1963.²³

The committee continued the push for an upgrade in black employment opportunities and the hiring of Birmingham's first black police officer. "We were trying to be helpful any way we could," asserted Rabbi Grafman. "It wasn't easy to be helpful at the time." Mayor Boutwell and the city council, however, had given the committee no real authority to bring about effective change. The committee criticized Boutwell and the council for their "hands off attitude" toward the recommendations. Bishop Durick pleaded with Mayor Boutwell to push for the hiring of blacks on the police force. African-

²² Grafman, Group Relations Committee Files, Grafman Papers; LaMonte, Politics and Welfare, p. 188; Doug Carpenter, interview.

²³ Community Affairs Committee on Group Relations Minutes, October 25, 1963, Grafman Papers.

American employment on the force had taken on a symbolic importance and was perhaps the key to long awaited progress and an "ultimate solution to our problems."²⁴

With no power to make effective change, the Group Relations Committee limped along for some time and ultimately dissolved without seeing any of its recommendations initiated by the city. The city council didn't appoint a black to an independent board or agency until December 1964 and it took two more years for Birmingham to hire a black police officer.²⁵

For the eight white clergy, 1963 proved to be a year of tremendous personal and professional changes. In December, Pope Paul VI promoted Bishop Durick to the post of Coadjutor Bishop of Nashville (the diocese then covering the entire state of Tennessee)—with right of succession to the aged Bishop William Adrian.²⁶ Within a few months, Durick directed all of the administrative duties of the diocese. He left Birmingham ignited with a new racial attitude. A rise in greater consciousness had occurred in Durick and he realized that segregation was not a mere political problem but an

²⁴ Grafman, interview, March 1, 1991; Durick to Mayor Albert Boutwell, October 12, 1963, Durick Papers.

²⁵ LaMonte, Politics and Welfare, p. 189.

²⁶ Durick interview, May 8, 1992; Bishop Durick always enjoyed telling a joke about the difference between an auxiliary bishop and a coadjutor. An auxiliary bishop shakes hands with the reigning bishop and asks "what can I do for you?" While the coadjutor shakes hands with the reigning bishop and asks "how are you feeling today?"

immense moral dilemma. The moderate-gradualist approach to racial justice gave way to a new sense of urgency. Durick clearly recognized that gradualist policies had grown outdated. Blacks would no longer settle for moderate progress, he believed. Time was slipping by and the country needed the fastest progress available to achieve genuinely equal opportunity.²⁷

As Durick's racial attitudes evolved, he set out on a course to "make up for lost time." Following the events in Birmingham, the paradigm shifted for Durick. Once it shifted, remembered Durick's colleague Father Joe Allen, all of its relationships were different. "He saw something had to be done," Allen said. The bishop later thanked God that he, and the South, "had the courage and will to cross the Rubicon" from one way of thinking to another. This freedom of spirit led Durick to make several bold stands on racial matters as the Catholic leader in Tennessee.²⁸

During 1968, he played an active role during the strike of black sanitation workers in Memphis. As the black community rallied around the strikers, Durick donated one thousand dollars from his discretionary funds to help feed the families of the strikers. "For the poor among you," he said.

²⁷ Durick, "Talk" (presented at Project Equality Luncheon and Business Meeting, Nashville, Tennessee, January 25, 1968), Durick Papers; Fort Worth Star Telegram, December 1, 1975.

²⁸ Allen, telephone conversation; Tennessee Register, July 4, 1994; Durick, interview, 8 May 1992.

It was the first gift of money from a white religious denomination—leading Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb to make several nasty remarks about Durick. Several Catholics in Memphis wrote Durick in disgust over his contribution to the strikers. The bishop, scolded one parishioner, must remain devoted to "our own people" and not to the "rabble rousers" in the street.²⁹

A strike support group organized a boycott of downtown stores, and commenced daily marches and rallies. All Catholic participants in the marches went forth with Durick's blessings—in marked contrast to the condemnation by other white religious leaders in the state. The "needs of Christ in his people must be served," Durick later reflected, and service to people equalled service to Christ. It was never "beneath priestly dignity" for a religious leader to march and demonstrate against racial injustice. The apostles had been "prophets to the world" and remained unafraid to rebuke in order to lead the world to a "Christian ethic of love, justice, and brotherhood."³⁰

While in Memphis to support the strikers, Martin Luther King, Jr. was cut down by an assassin's bullet on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel on April 4, 1968. Two days later,

²⁹ Joan Tuner Beifuss, At the River I Stand (Memphis, Tennessee: St. Lukes Press, 1990), p. 273; Harriet Verrell to Durick, March 23, 1968, Durick Papers.

³⁰ Durick, Homily (presented at the Convention of Serra International, July 1, 1970), Durick Papers.

Durick flew to Memphis and led a memorial Mass at the Immaculate Conception Church. Flanked by Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic clergymen, Durick honored King as the prophet of a black "crusade for dignity and freedom." The bishop characterized King as the black community's voice (encouraging his people to strive unyieldingly), their arms ("pointing out the way to the promised land"), their feet ("in his walk blazing a trail for freedom . . ."), their heart (by teaching and practicing nonviolence), their eloquence ("in humiliation"), and their mind ("as he forged for them weapons of nonviolence that withstood and blunted the ferocity of segregation"). In conclusion, Durick read a particularly self abasing passage from King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* that condemned the white moderate as the "great stumbling block in the stride towards freedom." Prayerfully, the bishop pleaded with God to

"examine our individual conscience—to assess my part of the blame in the death of Dr. King—may I resolve to a greater dedication and work to make our morality meaningful—as with greater vigor we translate it into the social power structure and into living laws and social institutions."³¹

In the shadows of a hundred flickering candles, mourners sang "Kumbaya" as they slowly moved toward the communion rail to honor the slain civil rights leader. On Monday April 8, the Catholic leader participated in a tense memorial march

³¹ Durick, untitled sermon (presented at Memorial Mass for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at Immaculate Conception Church, Memphis, Tennessee, April 6, 1968), Durick Papers.

through the streets of Memphis. A crowd estimated at thirty to forty thousand jammed City Hall Plaza to hear King's eulogizers, including Durick. The bishop humbly asked the crowd to join "in a spirit of true love" to enable those "in this weary world to instill some reality into the dream of Martin Luther King. . . ." ³²

Durick returned to Memphis a year later to join in a Good Friday memorial march and rally honoring King. Many Catholics condemned Durick's participation on a solemn holiday and the comments he made about King—especially the paraphrase of a famous Bob Dylan song: "For the spirit of Martin King, my friend, is blowin' in the wind. "His spirit is blowin' in the wind." ³³ Following the ceremony, several priests in Memphis began "quietly" criticizing Durick to parishioners. One communicant contended that most Catholics in the state had never understood the bishop's vision of equating political and social concerns with the "responsibility" of ministering to the "spiritual needs of those souls entrusted to him." The bishop's Good Friday march had been a "sad day" for all Catholics, wrote one Nashville resident. Durick had grown "so obsessed with contemporary fads" that he had been compelled to

³² Tennessean (Nashville), April 6, 1968; Beifuss, At the River I Stand, p. 416; Durick also sent out a pastoral letter to be read at Sunday masses throughout the state; Memphis Commercial Appeal, April 7, 1968.

³³ Durick, sermon (presented at the Martin Luther King Memorial Service, Memphis, Tennessee, April 4, 1969), Durick Papers; Tennessee Register, May 4, 1969.

"selfishly prance down public streets in honor of a racial demagogue and communist sympathizer." Consequently, the bishop had exalted a "man over the crucified Jesus" instead of offering a Good Friday Mass in a Catholic Cathedral.³⁴

To call the Tennessee Catholic reaction to Durick a backlash, was the "understatement of the century," wrote one angry Memphis resident. "Wholesale disgust and outright renunciation" had emerged as the "prevailing" and most "fitting terms." When one Catholic confronted Durick on why he participated in marches, he replied: "I suppose it was because others don't—or won't." Durick told Catholics the church had to emerge as the "conscience of society" and no longer remain a "chameleon." Society had been doomed if the church remained silent on the "vital issues" of human rights and human needs. "We cannot hide the pulpit today behind the Gothic facades of ancient buildings and let the rest of the world go by," Durick said. Religious leaders needed to physically serve the people and that often included marching in the streets. Clergymen, the bishop emphasized, made many "nice statements" from behind a desk or a pulpit, but until the people witnessed their physical involvement in confronting injustices they were "just not going to listen." Humbly and apologetically, Durick urged his flock to get involved in the fight for social justice. "Please do not misconstrue my

³⁴ Memphis Press-Scimitar, May 10, 1969; Tennessean, May 4, 1969.

remarks as righteous rhetoric," he explained after a lengthy exhortation, "but accept them as a plea for your individual and intelligent involvement."³⁵

In September 1969, Bishop Adrian resigned and Pope Paul VI gave Durick the title Bishop of Nashville. Durick announced he had "redoubled" his commitment to "seek human dignity" for all men regardless of race, political views, or church affiliation. He believed that a strong commitment to racial justice was the "best way" to serve "my God, my Church and my state." He had not always found involvement in social justice the "easiest course" except in the recesses of his own mind and in the loyalty to his "episcopal vow of being shepherd to the whole flock in Tennessee."³⁶

No other Catholic bishop in Tennessee, and perhaps the South, endured such a steady stream of criticism. Durick never sought a reputation as a controversial social activist, that was "only vain glory," he thought. God had been everything in Tennessee, Durick emphasized, and he had been nothing. Regardless, the bishop had ignited a period of unrest in the state, but all of his stands had "moral

³⁵ Durick, interview, May 8, 1992; Tennessean, May 4, 1969 National Register, May 10, 1969; Durick, untitled "remarks" (presented to Kiwanis International meeting in Memphis, Tennessee on February 11, 1970), Durick Papers.

³⁶ Ibid. Nashville Banner, September 10, 1969.

overtones" and a function of the church was to "speak up where moral issues were concerned."³⁷

Durick had emerged as one of the Catholic Church's most progressive and dynamic leaders. After eleven years of leading and sometimes dragging the diocese of Nashville into the modern era, the bishop longed for a quiet and passive assignment. In 1975, Durick retired to devote himself to full-time prison ministry. In his farewell statement to his fellow "pilgrims" of the Nashville diocese, Durick noted that despite all of the controversies, he had simply tried to take seriously the teachings of the church. He knew he had failed many times, but he always had a "Christian discontent" that drove him constantly to try to improve himself and society. As Durick marched down the aisle at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Nashville during the installation ceremony for his successor James D. Niedergeses in May 1975, many of those in attendance remembered other marches the bishop had participated in and wept over his departure. Others, however, were thankful to finally commemorate his retirement.³⁸

During December 1975, Durick arrived in Fort Worth, Texas to serve as a temporary Catholic chaplain in the Federal Correction Institution. "I came to do a little time myself," Durick explained and suggested the prison was just like a

³⁷ Fort Worth Star-Telegram, December 1, 1975.

³⁸ Tennessee Register, April 14, 1975; Tennessean, May 19, 1975.

parish, except for the walls and towers. He held mass in the basement of the religious ministry building known by the prisoners as the "Fish House" and invited a Southern Baptist "resident" (his term for inmate) to play the organ while Durick led the singing. After only three months, Durick moved on to another temporary assignment in another federal prison in Pleasanton, California. In addition to his Catholic duties, Durick had to conduct a weekly Protestant service in the absence of a Protestant pastor. He told a reporter that he was "quite at home" preaching to Protestants, having worked as a "tent revivalist" years before.³⁹

After six years of ministering to prisoners in various locations, a severe heart problem and subsequent surgery forced Durick into semi-retirement. He moved back to his parents' home in Bessemer, Alabama, less than a block from his boyhood parish of St. Aloysius. Despite a mild stroke in 1986, Durick continued to play an active role in the Catholic Church until the early 1990s.

In 1990, Durick celebrated his fiftieth year as a priest. In reflection, the editor of the Catholic Tennessee Register praised Durick for revolutionizing the Catholic Church in Tennessee. His "intrepid" stands on civil rights, labor relations, and the rights of the poor placed him in the forefront of Catholic leadership. Durick had also experienced many "painful moments," because these issues had been "land

³⁹ National Catholic Reporter, n.d., Durick Papers.

mines waiting to blow up, both within the church and without." He had been "praised as a visionary" and "criticized by those fighting any change in society's status quo." Time, however, had "proven him right." In a ceremony celebrating Durick's golden anniversary in Nashville, a number of older priests stood and made public apologies for opposing his social and racial stands. "Ah, those were the days," Durick often remembered. He hoped it had been the "spirit of God" that guided him down the road from passivist to activist. "I know it certainly was the right thing."⁴⁰

In the final weeks of his life, Durick said, he had been granted a "quiet peace" and was quite prepared for the "journey ahead." He felt grateful for the "good" God had given him and the "ability to try to make changes for the better." He quietly passed away in his sleep during the night of June 26, 1994. "He always made me feel that I was a Catholic," remembered noted Southern Baptist minister Will D. Campbell:

"Boundaries drawn by society—racial, religious, regional, citizen of the free world or citizen locked away by the state—were not of him. So in his presence we were all catholic, if not Catholic, for to him the universe was one."⁴¹

⁴⁰ Tennessee Register, March 19, 1990; Allen, telephone conversation; Durick, interview, May 8, 1992.

⁴¹ Durick, conversation with author, May 25, 1994; Birmingham News, June 27, 1994; Tennessee Register, July 4, 1994.

In Birmingham, many of the other eight white clergy moved on to new ministries. Within eighteen months, only Bishop Carpenter, Bishop Murray, and Rabbi Grafman remained in Birmingham. Intense pressure and harassment from belligerent segregationists within many Birmingham churches and the community took a toll on the effectiveness of many of the clergy's ministries—especially Edward Ramage at First Presbyterian and Earl Stallings at First Baptist.

The racial tensions that surfaced at First Presbyterian greatly distressed Edward Ramage. As with most moderates, he felt caught in the middle of a multi-sided argument. After meeting with Ramage and other white Birmingham ministers, Dr. William H. McCorkle, the top elected official of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, announced that the city's ministers were damned if they took steps toward integration and damned if they did not. "I will not sit in judgement," McCorkle told a Presbyterian gathering. "I ask you to pray earnestly for them and not to sit in judgment. We don't know what we would do there."⁴²

One church member at First Presbyterian recognized Ramage's precarious middle-of-the-road position and begged forgiveness from "those of us who ran away to safer fields, and those of us who condemned your silence, as well as those who now attack you." Others in the church feared for Ramage's safety: "I fear we have put upon you a burden requiring

⁴² Tennessean, October 7, 1963.

superhuman strength and I would urge you to consider your own welfare in this continuing crisis."⁴³

As the focal point of many of the vocal critics, Ramage grew concerned that the unrest might precipitate a split in the church. First Presbyterian's long-time minister decided that the church would heal quicker under different leadership and in the fall of 1963, Ramage resigned and took a pulpit at St. Paul's Presbyterian in Houston, Texas. When he made the final decision, he simply scrawled on his calendar, "I quit."⁴⁴

An editorial writer in the Birmingham News described Ramage as a "creative religious force" in the city. "His service, his guidance, his contribution toward enlightenment and his steady hand on our shoulders in time of considerable crisis, have been a very great benefit." One church elder at First Presbyterian later wrote that in times of change, Ramage was "acutely sensitive to our problems in balancing the circumstances and obligations which required response to change," while he maintained with "corresponding insistence the witness of the church to the fundamental Christian message."⁴⁵ Ramage served as the pastor at St. Paul's in

⁴³ Ann Fleming Deagon to Ramage, June 30, 1963, Ramage Papers; illegible to Ramage, June 24, 1963, Ramage Papers.

⁴⁴ Calendar for 1963, Ramage Papers.

⁴⁵ Undated newspaper clipping, Ramage Papers; Harold Walker to Thomas F. Williams, Jr., January 24, 1964, First Presbyterian Church Records, BPLDAM.

Houston until the 1970s and then at a church in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. He died in 1981.

Throughout the rest of his tenure at First Baptist Church of Birmingham, Earl Stallings continued to be the focus of segregationist discontent. One observer noted that the Southern Baptist minister was harassed and cruelly "dissected—none too kindly" by a segregationist element in the congregation. Following a particularly ugly confrontation over the racial issue between Stallings's son and several church members, the elder Stallings believed he needed to move on to more congenial surroundings. "Poor old Earl," remembered Bishop George Murray, "he really caught it. He spoke up [about race] and was driven out." In 1965, Stallings moved on to begin twelve-year tenure as the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Marietta, Georgia. In 1977, he left Georgia and became the director of Christian Social Ministries for the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention. He retired during the 1980s, but continued to play an active role as an evangelist and counselor to fellow senior citizens in 1996.⁴⁶

Driving Earl Stallings from the pulpit at First Baptist Church of Birmingham solved none of the church's problems in confronting the race question. The church continued to struggle with the dilemma for the next two decades.

⁴⁶ J. Herbert Gilmore, Jr., They Chose to Live: The Racial Agony of an American Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 17-18; Murray, interview, March 1, 1991; Chandler, conversation; Stallings, letter to author.

Stallings's replacement, James H. Landis remained at the First Baptist for only a short time before moving to a less volatile ministry in Texas. During the late 1960s, the Birmingham church entered a period of introspection over its mission to a rapidly changing demographic area in the inner-city. The Central City housing project across the street from the sanctuary had integrated and the congregation had reached a crossroads over whether to remain downtown or move to a new location. By 1968, church membership had dropped to roughly half of the 1953 total. The church unanimously approved a plan to remain and invited "all who will, whether they be young or old, proud or plain, rich or poor, to partake with us of the love of God."⁴⁷

During the fall of 1968, First Baptist hired the theologically liberal and highly controversial J. Herbert Gilmore, Jr. as the new pastor. Soon afterwards, a handful of African Americans began attending worship services and sending their children to Sunday School classes. Some members of the congregation grew increasingly uncomfortable and once again a First Baptist pastor became the focal point of intense criticism from segregationists. Adding to this problem, was another faction within the church that began grumbling at the same time about Gilmore's theological liberalism. Tensions came to a boiling point in 1970 when two blacks applied to the church for membership and failed to receive the necessary two-

⁴⁷ McGinnis, "The Controversy," p. 24.

thirds acceptance vote from members (usually just a formality). Gilmore announced he would not pastor a "racist church" and resigned along with most of the church staff. In turn, Gilmore and several hundred members of First Baptist formed the Baptist Church of the Covenant and held services in Rabbi Grafman's Temple Emanu-El.⁴⁸

During the weeks that followed, the controversy at First Baptist became a topic of intense debate among many of the city's leading white clergy, especially members of the Greater Birmingham Ministerial Association. Believing this to be an exclusively Christian matter, Rabbi Milton Grafman simply folded his arms and remained silent during the sometimes heated discussions. When one pastor noticed the usually zealous Grafman patiently and attentively listening, he asked the Jewish leader for his observations. With a voice that was both powerful and composed, Grafman told the Christian leaders that they must act boldly and confront the racial issue with all Biblical authority. As a silent hush and a calming spirit fell across the room, Grafman asked the clergy, how many had read the "series of little books" called the New Testament? "I have!" he proclaimed. "How many of you ever walked in the footsteps of Jesus Christ? I have! When you read these books and when you walk in his path, you will have your answer. He has settled this matter Gentlemen!" Following Grafman's passionate plea, the ministers quietly and unanimously passed

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

a resolution supporting racial inclusiveness in all Birmingham churches.⁴⁹

With the departure of another pastor and a large segment of its membership, First Baptist struggled for two years to find a new permanent minister. Andrew W. Tampling assumed the pulpit in 1972, but only stayed a little over three years. Other pastors followed for short tenures, adding to the instability of the dwindling downtown congregation. In November 1981, two-thirds of the church's members again failed to vote in favor of a black membership application. As Birmingham's inner-city housing became almost exclusively black by the early 1980s, the church retreated behind its fortress-like walls into a near siege state.⁵⁰

Finally in 1984, the congregation turned its back on the inner city and voted to sell the church property to a local bank. First Baptist Church selected a new location in an affluent and mostly white suburb near the city's Southern Baptist university—far away from the troubles of the past. Workers carefully removed the majestic stained glass windows from the old building (for use in the new sanctuary) and replaced the kaleidoscopic panes with sheets of knotty-pine plywood. The old church remained vacant for several years,

⁴⁹ Southern Shofar, July 1995; Gilmore, They Chose to Live, p. 59.

⁵⁰ Newspaper Clipping Files, Baptist Churches, Birmingham, First Baptist, Tutwiler Collection.

before the thick, stone walls came tumbling down to make way for a ground level parking lot.

Several years earlier, the old Tutwiler Hotel, where the eight white clergy held their frequent gatherings, was also razed to make way for parking. Bishop Nolan Harmon, who used the Tutwiler as his Birmingham home, checked out of the hotel for the final time in 1964 and returned to full-time duties as the leader of the Western North Carolina Conference. A few months later, Harmon retired from the episcopacy and joined the faculty at Emory University in Atlanta as a visiting professor, teaching classes on Methodist history, doctrine, and policy for the next twenty-five years. Harmon retired from his second career in his 96th year and died just short of his 101 birthday on June 8, 1993. A black southerner once asked Bishop Harmon if he had ever met Martin Luther King, Jr. "No," the bishop replied, "all he ever did was just write me a letter."⁵¹

Also in 1964, Hardin relinquished his appointment in Alabama and returned to full-time duties as the bishop of South Carolina. Annoyed by the misrepresentation of his ministry and racial outlook while in Alabama, Hardin worked diligently to change the racial climate among Methodists in South Carolina. For several years, leaders in the Methodist Church had pushed for the elimination of the separate, all

⁵¹ Bishop Nolan Harmon, interview by author, tape recording, Atlanta, Georgia, July 30, 1992.

black, Central Jurisdiction. The Central Jurisdiction's South Carolina Conference had the largest membership of any black conference, with over forty-five thousand members. In 1964, the African American bishop, C. F. Golden and Hardin began discussing a formal merger of the two conferences. "We are quietly and deliberately going about the business of setting things right," Hardin said. The walls of prejudice were "quietly but definitely" crumbling, with better communication and understanding "creeping in" to change attitudes. "The status quo of yesterday," the bishop added, "was not that of today, nor will today's be that of tomorrow."⁵²

Almost immediately a vocal group of belligerent segregationists began pressuring Hardin to halt the drive toward merger. When one angry layman confronted the bishop, Hardin responded: "You know, if I were you, and felt as you do toward the black race, I'd be afraid to die." The bishop continued to provide moderate leadership, despite additional pressure from black activists, who thought the process for merger remained too slow.⁵³ By the late 1960s, both conferences came under Hardin's episcopal leadership and the

⁵² Hardin, interview; Charles H. Lippy, "Towards an Inclusive Church: South Carolina Methodism and Race, 1972-1982" in Rethinking Methodist History: A Bicentennial Historical Consultation, eds. Russell E. Richey and Kenneth E. Row (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1983), pp. 220-21; Hardin, "Race and the Methodist Church: The Southeastern Jurisdiction" (report presented to Council of Bishops, April 1965), Hardin Papers.

⁵³ Hardin, interview.

bishop ordered both Annual Conferences to meet together for the first time. "I don't know whether it was legal or not," he said. "I didn't care." At the meeting, the black conference sat on one side of the aisle and the white conference on the other. Hardin sat before them in a squeaky, swivel chair answering questions about the merger. The tension was thick and when a white delegate asked how long it would be before the bishop assigned a black preacher to a white church, a hushed silence fell over the room. With a wide grin, Hardin answered: "Brother, I . . . can't hardly get you to take a white one." The auditorium exploded in laughter and the two sides slowly came to accept the merger. After several years of heated debate and squabbling over details, both conferences adopted a formal merger plan on January 27, 1972. Hardin retired that year and moved to a Methodist retirement area near Asheville, North Carolina. In 1996, he remained active in the affairs of the church.⁵⁴

Bishop Charles Colcock Jones Carpenter actively condemned civil disobedience throughout the rest of his life. During the Selma demonstrations of 1965, the bishop publicly urged all Alabama Episcopalians not to participate in a proposed Selma to Montgomery march scheduled for Sunday, March 21. He termed the demonstration "a foolish business and sad waste of time" where the "childish instinct to parade at great cost" to Alabama would be indulged." He resented the presence of

⁵⁴ Ibid. Lippy, "Towards and Inclusive Church," p. 221.

"outside agitators," whom he hoped would soon depart "and let us get on with the progress we are trying to make in this part of our country for which we feel a special responsibility."⁵⁵

During the same week, the Right Reverend C. Kilmer Myers, Suffragan Bishop of Michigan, informed Carpenter of his plans to conduct a worship service in the sanctuary at Selma's prestigious Episcopal Church, St. Paul's, on the Saturday before the march. When Carpenter barred the visiting Episcopalians from using the church, Myers proceeded with his plans for the prayer service. Carpenter, however, ordered the doors locked at St. Paul's. Not intimidated, Myers held the service at the dividing line between white and black Selma. "Your crude and rude action in this matter," Carpenter scolded Myers, "makes me doubt the sincerity of your motives in coming to Selma where you did damage to the life and work of the church, particularly at a time when we are trying to work through a very difficult situation. . . ." Carpenter advised Myers to "learn some manners" if he ever came back to Alabama.⁵⁶

A clergyman in Myers's diocese, the Reverend Carl Sayre, called for Carpenter's resignation. "As bishop of Alabama, you have been to the flock of Christ, a wolf and not a

⁵⁵ Carpenter, Statement, Carpenter Papers.

⁵⁶ Rt. Rev. C. Kilmer Myers to Carpenter, March 20, 1963, Carpenter Papers; Carpenter to C. Kilmer Myers, March 24, 1965, Carpenter Papers.

shepherd," Sayre wrote Carpenter, "you have devoured them and not fed them, by making common cause with Governor Wallace's defiance of his nation and church. As the Governor stood wrongly in the school house door, you have stood wrongly and symbolically" in the doorway of God's House. Carpenter announced that did not plan to resign and dismissed Sayre as a "little fellow" who wanted publicity.⁵⁷

Despite Carpenter's hard-line stand against the civil rights activists, he instructed the vestry of St. Paul's to allow interracial groups to worship there. On Easter Sunday, March 28, the church tolerated an interracial group, including students from the Episcopal Theological School at Cambridge. The bishop relayed his deep sympathy to a member of St. Paul's for "all of the difficulties to which you have been subjected." He felt that the local situation had been handled well and wished before long the unwanted "visitors" would all return home.⁵⁸

Ushers seated the group on the back pews behind several empty rows of pews. Due to these seating arrangements, they also received the sacrament last. In typically moderate fashion, Carpenter's actions provoked attacks from liberals and conservatives. Many church members protested the admission of the biracial group, and the visiting group

⁵⁷ Undated newspaper clipping, Carpenter Papers; Carpenter to Richard S. Emrich, April 6, 1965, Carpenter Papers.

⁵⁸ Carpenter to Mrs. David N. McCullough, April 20, 1965, Carpenter Papers.

criticized Carpenter for the seating arrangements that they described as the "old slave gallery" in the church. The group believed it was ironic that in the state where blacks fought back-of-the-bus seating, the Episcopal Church sought to "maintain the old racial patterns." "We cannot let this devious maneuver go unchallenged," they charged. "The Carpenter of Birmingham must not be allowed to forever deny the Carpenter of Nazareth."⁵⁹

On April 30, the group picketed diocesan headquarters. Several protesters carried signs proclaiming "Bishop Sanctions Segregated Seating In Selma Church" and "Slave Gallery Revived." One of the protesters was a twenty-six-year-old Episcopal Theological School student, Jonathan Myrick Daniels. A New Hampshire native, Daniels had moved to Selma to "encourage and uplift" local blacks by showing them that someone cared enough to live and work in their community. Daniels also worked to open communication between the residents of the black and white communities. "Sometimes we confront the posse," Daniels wrote, "and sometimes we hold a child. Sometimes we stand with men who have learned to hate, and sometimes we must stand a little apart from them."⁶⁰ Daniels consistently attended St. Paul's with several

⁵⁹ ESCRU Statement, April 29, 1965, Carpenter Papers.

⁶⁰ Reverend John Morris to Directors, Chapter Chairman, and Members, April 30, 1965, ESCRU Papers; ESCRU Staff to the Clergy of the Diocese of Alabama, May 1, 1965, ESCRU Papers; ESCRU brochure on Jonathan Daniels, Carpenter Papers.

interracial groups. "Our life in Selma is filled with ambiguity, and in that we share with men everywhere," he surmised. "We are beginning to see as we never saw before that we are truly in the world and yet ultimately not of it." "Selma, Alabama is like all the world;" the city needed the life and witness of "militant saints," he added.⁶¹

In late spring Daniels returned to seminary to finish his final exams. That summer he returned to Selma as a representative in a "continuing ministry of presence." On August 14 Daniels participated in a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) demonstration in Fort Deposit in Lowndes County, Alabama. Local police arrested the demonstrators "for their own protection" and placed them in the cramped Fort Deposit Jail. The prisoners were soon transferred to a bigger facility in nearby Hayneville. The group sang freedom songs as they rode to the jail in the back of a garbage truck. In an equally "wretched" facility, Daniels shared a cell with veteran SNCC activists Stokley Carmichael and Chris Wildy. The trio spent time talking, singing, and worshipping God. On August 20, police unexpectedly released the entire group. With no transportation, Daniels and three others walked to a small grocery store for a bottle of Coke. Lowndes County Deputy Sheriff Thomas Coleman ordered them off the property and

⁶¹ ESCRU brochure on Jonathan Daniels, Carpenter Papers.

shouted "get the hell out of here or I'll blow your head off" as he shot and mortally wounded Daniels.⁶²

Two days before Daniels's arrest, Carpenter wrote to the Reverend Frank Mathews at St. Paul's about Daniels. "If he is hanging around causing trouble, I think I will just have to write to his Bishop and tell him to take him on back to Seminary," Carpenter maintained, "but I will be awaiting word from you as to just how he is behaving himself." When Carpenter learned of Daniels's death, the bishop issued a brief response. He termed Daniels's death as "deplorable," believing that the event was another example of the "current wave of lawlessness sweeping our country."⁶³

Police later arrested Thomas Coleman. At his trial for manslaughter, Coleman claimed Daniels had waved a knife and he had fired the gun in self-defense. After deliberating for one hour and forty-three minutes, a jury of twelve white men acquitted Coleman. John E. Hines, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, deplored the verdict. Defense attorneys had "assassinated the character of a man already dead," Hines contended. The life of Jonathan Daniels was "no more and no less valuable than that of any other man in the sight of God." The bishop believed the cause in which Daniels laid down his

⁶² Jonathan Daniels, The Jon Daniels Story (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), p. 43.

⁶³ Carpenter to T. Frank Mathews, April 12, 1965, Carpenter Papers; Carpenter to The Living Church, undated, Carpenter Papers.

life was "dear to everyone who breathes the air of free men."⁶⁴

Many Episcopal leaders urged Bishop Carpenter to make a strong statement deploring the verdict. However he again responded in ambivalent fashion. "Disagreement with another person's actions or even disapproval of his sin is no justification for attacking his person or taking his life," Carpenter affirmed. He called on Alabama Christians to pray that the acquittal of Thomas Coleman would not be interpreted "as a license to kill or injure those with whom we disagree or whose behavior we disapprove."⁶⁵

Carpenter served three more years as bishop. One Episcopal lay leader remembered the bishop's declining health in those years; as he was tired, frail, and exhausted. The constant stress during a time of great social unrest took a heavy toll on Carpenter. "It made him an old man before his time," Bishop George Murray remembered. "It took a toll on him" as it "took a toll on me." Carpenter determined to finish out his thirty years of service. When he retired in 1968, he was the senior bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church. In ill-health, Carpenter lived only a few remaining months and died on June 29, 1969.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ ESCRU brochure on Jonathan Daniels, Carpenter Papers; Daniels, The Jon Daniels Story, pp. 48-50.

⁶⁵ Birmingham News, October 2, 1965.

⁶⁶ Rupp interview; Murray interview, February 8, 1991.

Bishop Murray succeeded Carpenter as the Episcopal Bishop of Alabama and continued to press for open communication between the races, as he had during the Birmingham crisis. "The world around us is involved in change at a near unbelievable rate," Murray said in 1969. "The church's job is to help people live with change, and with one another in change." As with most white, southern, moderate religious leaders, Murray believed the church's role was not to create change but to serve as a "guiding and reconciling agent for society in change."⁶⁷

Murray, however, did radically change the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama. The bishop proposed dividing the state with Birmingham the headquarters for a North Alabama Diocese and Mobile the headquarters for a South Alabama-Northwest Florida Diocese. When the Alabama diocese was divided in 1971, Murray jumped at the opportunity to leave Birmingham and move to Mobile. He served as bishop until he retired in 1981. He continued to play an active role in church affairs from his retirement home in Fairhope, Alabama in 1996.

Until his death in 1995, Rabbi Milton Grafman played an energetic role in building Birmingham's future. In 1964, the Ku Klux Klan threatened to sue Grafman for libel after he asserted that the organization was devoted to racial hatred and religious bigotry. In 1975, he retired as the Temple Emanu-El's rabbi, but he remained dedicated to an active

⁶⁷ Alabama Churchman, March 1969.

public life for the next twenty years. "It's bothered me very much to see some people in this city do so much and then retire and fade away," he once said. "They should give more since they are free of the responsibility of a specific job and have more time to give to the community."⁶⁸

Since he remained in Birmingham for so long, the negative media portrait from Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, continued to haunt Grafman. Through the years, Grafman often received letters from curiosity seekers, asking if he was still a segregationist and a bigot. Racial moderates were a lonely, misunderstood group. Grafman believed moderates had to "play the game" and say what the media and the movement expected or face being labeled a bigot or a reactionary. "They were not interested in what the truth was," the rabbi insisted. "There were efforts being made," Grafman said, "and decent people here."⁶⁹

Nonetheless, the actions of belligerent segregationists and the silence of many moderate segregationists and moderates bear at least some of the responsibility for Birmingham's poor image. Yet few outside the region understood the complexity of race relations in the South. In Birmingham, racial opinions varied greatly among the white community—no evil monolith existed. Regardless, through efforts by the movement

⁶⁸ Stephen Grafman, letter to author; Birmingham News, May 3, 1983.

⁶⁹ Grafman, interview, March 1, 1991; Grafman, interview, July 27, 1977.

and the mass media, much of the country continued to judge Birmingham by the brutal actions of belligerent segregationists. The events in Alabama's largest city during the spring of 1963 had broad national implications. Birmingham brought civil rights to the forefront of the nation's conscience and moved the U.S. government to take legislative action to safeguard the rights of all Americans. "It was the year of Birmingham," Martin Luther King said, "when the civil rights issue was impressed on the nation in a way that nothing else before had been able to do." For many Americans, King emerged as the symbol of the black quest for civil rights and a great American hero. Time magazine selected King the "Man of the Year" for 1963 and a year later, the civil rights leader received the Nobel Peace Prize.⁷⁰

The publicity from the Birmingham campaign, however, also had a lasting impact on the eight white clergy addressed in King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. The ministers felt used by King, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the national media. Like the city of Birmingham, the eight religious leaders had a difficult time living down the negative images.

⁷⁰ "Man of the Year: Never Again Where He Was," Time January 3, 1964.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In some measure, the white ministers felt that while King had won a great public relations victory, they had ultimately won the substantive argument with the civil rights leader. Subsequent changes in Birmingham occurred only at a gradual and moderate pace. Inevitably, the citizens of Birmingham (not King and the SCLC), both black and white, brought about the real change in the city. As the white clergy argued, moderation and the push for change had been in process several months before King arrived on the scene. The Freedom Rides, the park controversy, and the excesses of Eugene "Bull" Connor and the city commission had rallied the reform forces of moderates and several moderate segregationists in the white community.

Many moderates, including the eight white ministers, saw a measure of vindication in the 1967 U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding King's conviction for violating the court order and marching on Good Friday 1963. The high court's ruling in a narrow 5-4 decision, required the civil rights leader to return to Birmingham and serve five days in the city's jail. Writing the majority opinion, Justice Potter Stewart seemed to echo the white ministers' law and order and "unwise and untimely" arguments. One may sympathize with civil rights activists' "impatient commitment to their cause,"

Stewart wrote, but respect for the legal process was a "small price to pay for the civilizing hand of law, which alone can give abiding meaning to constitutional freedom." Stewart emphasized that King and the other marchers had no right to bypass an "orderly judicial review of the injunction before disobeying it."¹

On the other hand, Justice William J. Brennan wrote a particularly forceful dissent, arguing that convictions for contempt of court orders which abridged the First Amendment "must be condemned." Clearly, Brennan recognized the symbolism and the public relations motives King and the civil rights activists had in marching. The justice believed the activists had effectively dramatized the quest for racial justice by choosing to march on Good Friday, April 12, 1963. The civil rights demonstrators had hoped "to gain the attention to their cause which such timing might attract," he wrote.²

The decision disappointed King. "I am sad," King told reporters, "that the Supreme Court could not uphold the rights of individual citizens in the face of deliberate use of oppression." Regardless, Wyatt Walker, Ralph Abernathy, King, and other SCLC associates returned to Birmingham during early November 1967 to finally serve out the sentence ordered by Judge Jenkins some four and a half years before. King again

¹ *Walker v. City of Birmingham* (1967).

² *Ibid.*

wore his prison uniform: a denim shirt, blue work pants and a sweater. He brought three books: the Bible, John Kenneth Galbraith's The New Industrial State, and William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner. Walker brought his camera and snapped several striking pictures of a reflective King staring through the bars of a jail cell.³

Until his death in 1968, King continued to use dramatic symbolism and the national news media to break down racial and economic barriers. Only a few weeks after the Birmingham movement, the black minister looked to join the struggle for civil rights in Danville, Virginia. King promised to bring his "task force" to the southern Virginia town to help mobilize people and attract national attention. As in Birmingham, and earlier in Albany, the symbolic rhetoric began anew. "Virginia is really the leader of the southern segregationist forces," Ralph Abernathy added. "As Virginia goes, the South will go."⁴

Despite the diligent efforts of thousands of grass roots volunteers across the nation, the excesses and successes of Birmingham were never again duplicated on such a scale. Campaigns in Danville, St. Augustine, and Chicago never captured the imagination of a national audience. Only in Selma, Alabama in 1965, did King and the SCLC confront a

³ Time, November 10, 1967.

⁴ "Rev. King to Come to Danville," Freedom Banner, September 29, 1963, in possession of Avon Rollins, Knoxville, Tennessee.

belligerent southern lawman and garner the attention of the news media and the public.

While most of Birmingham's white community (belligerent segregationists, moderate segregationists, and moderates) dismissed King (and the press) as a disruptive outside force, the movement and the media played an important part in forcing the city to confront the race question. King and the movement provided most of Birmingham's African-American community with a sense of empowerment and a spirit of boldness to confront exclusion and inequality. He served as a symbolic black Moses—willing to pay any price to lead his people to the promised land of freedom. The civil rights leader and his associates provided the local protest element in Birmingham access to the national news media via King's own personal image and the organized efforts of public relations operatives within the SCLC. King and the demonstrations, in a not so subtle way, required the city's white citizens to come to grips with racism in Birmingham. The quest for racial equality rendered formerly invisible blacks suddenly highly visible at lunch counters, restaurants, and in other social settings.⁵

Through the slow process of change, Birmingham's racial climate was quietly transformed. At the end of the 1960s, some five thousand black children were attending formerly all-white schools (in 1963, only seven blacks were in integrated

⁵ Time, January 3, 1964.

classrooms). Registered black voters had increased dramatically and African-Americans held important positions on the planning commission, the Chamber of Commerce, the board of education, and all the major civic organizations. During the elections of 1969, civil rights attorney Arthur Shores became the first black elected to the nine-member City Council.⁶

Despite the rising political fortunes of Birmingham's African-American community, the city's image remained tied to the events of 1963. At the signing of the truce between the SCLC and the city's business leaders in May 1963, King proclaimed that Birmingham stood on the "threshold of becoming a great enlightened symbol, shining the radiance of its example throughout the entire nation."⁷ Despite these optimistic pronouncements and vast changes, Birmingham remained the symbol of racial intolerance.

In the years following the movement, selling Birmingham to prospective businesses proved a near impossible task. "You'd finish speaking at some convention up North," said one Birmingham business leader, "and the first question they'd ask you was 'How many niggers did you get before breakfast?'" The city's image was so bad at times, leaders even considered changing Birmingham's name. In a twist of irony, just as Martin Luther King had often turned to New Yorkers to help his

⁶ "The Change in Birmingham," Newsweek, December 8, 1969; ironically, Eugene "Bull" Connor happened to visit the council chambers the day Shores was sworn in.

⁷ Corley, "Quest," pp. 271-72.

publicity campaigns, Birmingham officials hired a New York public relations firm to "show that the good folk down here don't have horns."⁸

In 1979, Birmingham citizens elected the city's first black mayor, Richard Arrington, and continued reelecting him the next sixteen years. Arrington emerged as a tremendous symbol of the empowerment of the black community and a shining example of the many changes in the city since 1963.

Through the years, extensive revitalization efforts transformed Birmingham's business district from a gritty, industrial center into a symbol of New South progress. Yet despite this outward facelift, race relations remain polarized. An underlying bitterness and subtle animosity still seeps through the city as a lingering reminder of the long years of racial separation. Defacto segregation has been replaced by a dejure apartheid mentality by both races. Few whites and black (to borrow a phrase from Eugene "Bull" Connor) "segregate together." There are few interracial churches in the city and blacks would be no more welcome in most of the area's white congregations than they would have been in 1963.⁹

In 1992, the new Birmingham Civil Rights Institute opened across the street from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and was dedicated as a "testament to building bridges of

⁸ "The Change in Birmingham," Newsweek, December 8, 1969.

⁹ Newsweek, April 15, 1963, p. 29.

understanding among all people." The Institute proudly displayed a replica of King's 1963 Birmingham jail cell, including the original door—removed year's before during jail renovations. The *Letter from Birmingham Jail's* moving words were printed on the walls surrounding the cell. Missing, however, were the names of the eight white ministers. Despite their role in the struggle for civil rights, they had simply been written out of history—deemed irrelevant to the quest for racial justice in the South.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: THE WHITE MINISTERS' LAW AND ORDER STATEMENT

16 JANUARY 1963

An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense

In these times of tremendous tensions, and change in cherished patterns of life in our beloved Southland, it is essential that men who occupy places of responsibility and leadership shall speak concerning their honest convictions.

We the undersigned clergymen have been chosen to carry heavy responsibility in our religious groups. We speak in a spirit of humility, and only for our ourselves. We do not pretend to know all the answers, for the issues are not simple. Nevertheless, we believe our people expect and deserve leadership from us, and we speak with firm conviction for we do know the ultimate spirit in which all problems of human relations must be solved.

It is clear that a series of court decisions will soon bring about desegregation of certain schools and colleges in Alabama. Many sincere people oppose this change and are deeply troubled by it. As southerners, we understand this. We nevertheless feel that defiance is neither the right answer nor the solution. And we feel that inflammatory and rebellious statements can lead only to violence, discord, confusion and disgrace for our beloved state.

We therefore affirm, and commend to our people:

1. That hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions.

2. That there may be disagreement concerning laws and social change without advocating defiance, anarchy and subversion.

3. That laws may be tested in courts or changed by legislatures, but not ignored by whims of individuals.

4. That constitutions may be amended or judges impeached by proper action, but our American way of life depends upon obedience to the decisions of courts of competent jurisdiction in the meantime.

5. That no person's freedom is safe unless every person's freedom is equally protected.

6. That freedom of speech must at all costs be preserved and exercised without fear of recrimination or harassment.

7. That every human being is created in the image of God and is entitled to respect as a fellow human being with all basic rights, privileges, and responsibilities which belong to humanity.

We respectfully urge those who strongly oppose desegregation to pursue their convictions in the courts, and in the meantime peacefully to abide by the decisions of those same courts.

We recognize that our problems cannot be solved in our strength nor on the basis of human wisdom alone. The situation which confronts us calls for earnest prayer, for clear thought, for understanding love, and for courageous action. Thus we call on all people of goodwill to join us in seeking divine guidance as we make our appeal for law and order and common sense.

Signed by:

Bishop Nolan B. Harmon, Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the Methodist Church

Bishop Paul Hardin, Bishop of the Alabama-West Florida Conference of the Methodist Church

C.C.J. Carpenter, D.D., LL.D., Bishop of Alabama

Joseph A. Durick, D.D., Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham

Earl Stallings, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama

George M. Murray, D.D., LL.D., Bishop Coadjutor, Episcopal Diocese of Alabama

Rabbi Milton L. Grafman, Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, Alabama

Edward V. Ramage, D.D., Moderator, Synod of the Alabama Presbyterian Church in the United States

Rev. Soterios D. Gouvellis, Priest, Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church

Rabbi Eugene Blackschleger, Temple Beth-Or, Montgomery, Alabama

J.T. Beale, Secretary-Director, Christian Churches of Alabama

APPENDIX II: THE WHITE MINISTERS' GOOD FRIDAY STATEMENT

12 APRIL 1963

We the undersigned clergymen are among those who, in January, issued "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense", in dealing with racial problems in Alabama. We expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts, but urged that decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed.

Since that time there had been some evidence of increased forbearance and a willingness to face facts. Responsible citizens have undertaken to work on various problems which cause racial friction and unrest. In Birmingham, recent public events have given indication that we all have opportunity for a new constructive and realistic approach to racial problems.

However, we are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.

We agree rather with certain local negro leadership which has called for honest and open negotiation of racial issues in our area. And we believe this kind of facing of issues can best be accomplished by citizens of our own metropolitan area, white and negro, meeting with their knowledge and experience of the local situation. All of us need to face that responsibility and find proper channels for its accomplishment.

Just as we formerly pointed out that "hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions", we also point out that such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham.

We commend the community as a whole, and the local news media and law enforcement officials in particular, on the calm manner in which these demonstrations have been handled. We urge the public to continue to show restraint should the demonstrations continue, and the law enforcement officials to remain calm and continue to protect our city from violence.

We further strongly urge our own negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When

rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense. Signed by:

Bishop Nolan B. Harmon, Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the Methodist Church

Bishop Paul Hardin, Bishop of the Alabama-West Florida Conference of the Methodist Church

C.C.J. Carpenter, D.D., LL.D., Bishop of Alabama

Joseph A. Durick, D.D., Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham

Rabbi Milton L. Grafman, Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, Alabama

George M. Murray, D.D., LL.D., Bishop Coadjutor, Episcopal Diocese of Alabama

Edward V. Ramage, D.D., Moderator, Synod of the Alabama Presbyterian Church in the United States

Earl Stallings, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama

APPENDIX IV: THE WHITE MINISTERS' ANTI-VIOLENCE STATEMENT

7 SEPTEMBER 1963

Once again we feel bound to issue a solemn call for law and order and common sense in dealing with our racial problem in Birmingham. Violence has broken out. Life has been taken.

We condemn anew the dastardly act of bombing which has not only imperiled human life but has also enkindled anew a potentially explosive situation.

We reaffirm our trust, however, in the citizens and public officials of Birmingham, and believe that there is enough good will and intelligence and respect for law and order on the part of people of both races in our city for this present situation to be resolved in dignity and in obedience to the orders of the courts of our land.

Let all cooperate with our city officials and law enforcement officers in restoring peace and assuring at all costs the continuance of public education. We beseech the prayers of all children of God and men of good will in this mutual crisis.

Let all remember that Almighty God will judge us for all our actions; for each day is a judgment day. Let us, therefore approach all our actions prayerfully, seeking to do as well as to accept God's will for and for our community.

Signed by:

Bishop Nolan B. Harmon, Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the Methodist Church

Bishop Paul Hardin, Bishop of the Alabama-West Florida Conference of the Methodist Church

C.C.J. Carpenter, D.D., LL.D., Bishop of Alabama

John M. Crowell, Moderator, Synod of the Alabama Presbyterian Church in the United States

Joseph A. Durick, D.D., Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham

Earl Stallings, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama

George M. Murray, D.D., LL.D., Bishop Coadjutor, Episcopal Diocese of Alabama

Rabbi Milton L. Grafman, Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, Alabama

VITA

Jonathan Bass was born in Fort Lauderdale, Florida on November 13, 1964. He attended schools in Plantation and Hollywood, Florida, and Midfield and Fairfield, Alabama. He graduated from Fairfield High School in 1982. He entered the University of Alabama at Birmingham in September 1982, and graduated in June 1986 with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies (Journalism) and History. In July 1986, he went to work as the Sports Information Director at Birmingham-Southern College in Birmingham, Alabama. While working full-time, he pursued a Master's degree in History from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He resigned from Birmingham-Southern College in 1990, and went to work as a teaching and research assistant in the Department of History at UAB. He received his degree later that year, and obtained a position as a reporter for a Birmingham newspaper. In August 1992, he entered the University of Tennessee, Knoxville to pursue a Ph.D. in History. The doctoral degree was received in December, 1996.

He is presently working as an instructor in the African and African-American Studies Program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.