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The Christian Way of Life in Human Relations, Address Delivered at the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches

[4 December 1957]
[St. Louis, Mo.]

In his second of two addresses during the annual meeting of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., King charges that "all too many ministers are still silent while evil rages."¹ He calls on church leaders to be "maladjusted" to social injustice and asserts that "the aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness." The following text is taken from an audio recording of the event at St. Louis's Kiel Auditorium.²

It is impossible to look out into the wide arena of American life without noticing a real crisis in race relations. This crisis has been precipitated, on the one hand, by the determined resistance of reactionary elements in the South to the Supreme Court's momentous decision outlawing segregation in the public schools. This resistance has often risen to ominous proportions. The legislative halls of the South ring loud with such words as "interposition" and "nullification."³ In many states, the Ku Klux Klan is on the march again, and also there are the White Citizens Councils.⁴ Each of these organizations is determined to preserve segregation at any cost and, thereby, defy the desegregation rulings of the Supreme Court. All of these forces have conjoined to make for massive resistance.

The crisis has been precipitated, on the other hand, by the radical change in the Negro's evaluation of himself. It is probably true to say that there would be no crisis in race relations if the Negro continued to think of himself in inferior terms and

1 In a 16 April 1957 letter, J. Quinter Miller, an assistant general secretary of the National Council of Churches, invited King to speak at its General Assembly on 4 December 1957, and at the Council's public session of the Division of Christian Life and Work the preceding evening (King, *The Oneness of Man in American Intergroup Relations*, Address delivered at the National Council of Churches Division of Christian Life and Work visitors program, 3 December 1957). King accepted Miller's invitation on 1 May 1957. As part of a session on "Oneness in Christ Across the Races," King delivered this 4 December 1957 address to the General Assembly after a speech by Yale Divinity School dean Liston Pope, then participated in a panel discussion (National Council of the Churches of Christ, Program, Public Meeting of the General Assembly, 4 December 1957). King's address was covered in a front-page article in the conference newspaper ("'Silent Good' People Called to Repent with 'Noisy Bad' People," *The Assemblyman: Official Newspaper of the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches*, 5 December 1957). He was also scheduled to speak at Washington University's Graham Memorial Chapel on the morning of this address ("Martin Luther King to Speak Tomorrow," *Student Life: Washington University in St. Louis*, 3 December 1957).

2 A transcription of this speech was later published in *Presbyterian Life* 11 (8 February 1958): 11-13.

3 King highlights legal strategies advocated by southern political leaders to thwart enforcement of federal laws and the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions of 1954 and 1955.

4 Citizens Councils were anti-civil rights groups, the first Council was formed in Indianola, Mississippi, in July 1954 in response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

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patiently accepted injustice and exploitation. But it is at this very point that the change has come.

For many years, the Negro tacitly accepted segregation. The system of slavery and segregation caused many Negroes to feel that perhaps they were inferior. Indeed this is the ultimate tragedy of segregation. It not only harms one physically, but it injures one spiritually. It scars the soul and distorts the personality. It inflicts the segregator with a false sense of superiority, while inflicting the segregated with a false sense of inferiority.⁵

But through the forces of history, something happened to the Negro. He came to feel that he was somebody. He came to believe and to know that the important thing about a man is not his specificity but his fundamentum, not the color of his skin or the texture of his hair, but the texture and quality of his soul. And so there has been a revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of his nature and destiny and a concomitant determination to achieve freedom and human dignity, whatever the cost may be.

This determination of Negro Americans to win freedom from all forms of oppression springs from the same deep longing for freedom that motivates oppressed peoples all over the world. The rhythmic beat of the deep rumbling of discontent from Asia and Africa is at bottom a quest for freedom and human dignity on the part of people who have long been the victims of colonialism and imperialism.

The struggle for freedom on the part of oppressed people in general, and the American Negro in particular, is not suddenly going to disappear. It is sociologically true that privileged classes rarely ever give up their privileges without strong resistance. It is also sociologically true that once oppressed people rise up against their oppression, there is no stopping point short of full freedom. And so realism impels us to admit that the struggle will continue until freedom is a reality for all of the oppressed peoples of the world. Since the struggle will continue, the basic question which confronts the oppressed peoples of the world is this: How will the struggle against the forces of injustice be waged?

Now there are two possible answers to this question. One is to resort to the all too prevalent method of physical violence and corroding hatred. Violence appears to have become the inseparable twin of Western materialism. It has even become the hallmark of its grandeur. Violence nevertheless solves no social problems, it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Occasionally violence brings temporary victory but never permanent peace. There is still a voice crying through the vista of time saying to every potential Peter, "Put up your sword."⁶ History is replete with the bleached bones of nations and communities that failed to follow this command. If

5 King's discussion of the effects of segregation is similar to Benjamin Mays's observation in a 1955 speech, "The Moral Aspects of Segregation." "The chief sin of segregation is the distortion of human personality. It damages the soul of both the segregator and the segregated. It gives the segregated a feeling of inherent inferiority which is not based on facts, and it gives the segregator a feeling of superiority which is not based on facts" (William Faulkner, Benjamin E. Mays, and Cecil Sims, *Three Views of the Segregation Decisions* [Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1956], p. 15). King kept a copy of this book in his personal library.

6 Cf. John 18:11.

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the American Negro and other victims of oppression succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle for freedom, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and their chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos

The alternative to violence is a method of nonviolent resistance. This method is nothing more and nothing less than Christianity in action. It seems to me to be the Christian way of life in solving problems of human relations. You will well remember that this method was made famous in our generation by Mohandas K. Gandhi, who used it to free his country from the political domination and economic exploitation inflicted upon it by the British Empire. This method has also been used in Montgomery, Alabama, under the leadership of ministers of several denominations, to free 50,000 Negroes from the long night of bus segregation.

Several basic things can be said about nonviolence as a method of bringing about better racial conditions. First, this is not a method of cowardice or stagnant passivity. It does resist. It is true that this method is passive, or non-aggressive, in the sense that the nonviolent resister is not aggressive physically toward his opponent. But his mind and emotions are always active, constantly seeking to persuade the opponent that he is mistaken. This method is passive physically, but it is strongly active spiritually.

The second basic fact about this method is that it does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding. The nonviolent resister must often voice his protest through non-cooperation or boycotts, but he realizes that non-cooperation and boycotts are not ends within themselves, they are merely means to awaken the sense of moral shame within the opponent. But the end is redemption. The end is reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.

A third fact that characterizes the method of nonviolence is that the attack is directed at forces of evil rather than persons caught in the forces. It is evil that we are seeking to defeat, not the persons victimized with evil. Those of us who struggle against racial injustice must come to see that the basic tension is not between races. As I like to say to the people in Montgomery, Alabama, "The tension in this city is not between white people and Negro people. The tension is at bottom between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And if there is a victory it will be a victory not merely for 50,000 Negroes, but a victory for justice, a victory for freedom, a victory for the forces of light. We are out to defeat injustice and not white persons who may happen to be unjust."

A fourth point that must be brought out concerning the method of nonviolence is that this method not only avoids external physical violence, but also internal violence of spirit. At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. In struggling for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world must not become bitter or indulge in hate campaigns. To retaliate with hate and bitterness would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives.

In speaking of love at this point, we are not referring to some sentimental or affectionate emotion. It would be nonsense to urge men to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense. Love in this connection means understanding goodwill. The Greek language comes to our aid in dealing with this problem. There are three

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words in the Greek New Testament for love. And first, there is *eros*. In platonic philosophy *eros* meant the yearning of the soul for the realm of the gods. It has come now to mean a sort of aesthetic or romantic love. Second, there is *philia*. It meant intimate affection between personal friends. *Philia* denotes a sort of reciprocal love. The person loves because he is loved.

When we speak of loving those who would oppose us, we refer neither to *eros* nor *philia*. We speak of a love which is expressed in the Greek word *agape*. *Agape* means nothing sentimental or basically affectionate. It means understanding, creative, redeeming goodwill for all men.⁷ It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object. It is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is the love of God operating in the human heart. When we rise to love on the *agape* level, we love men not because we like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal to us, but we love them because God loves them. Here we rise to the position of loving the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does.

A fifth basic fact about the method of nonviolent resistance is that it is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice. It is this deep faith in the future that causes a nonviolent resister to accept suffering without retaliation. He knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship.

Now I am aware of the fact that there are devout believers in nonviolence who find it difficult to believe in a personal God. But even these persons believe in the existence of some creative force that works for togetherness, whether we call it a principle of concretion as in Whitehead, a process of integration as Henry Nelson Wieman, Being Itself as Paul Tillich, an impersonal Brahma as Hinduism, or a personal being of boundless power and infinite love.⁸ We must believe that there is a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole. There is a creative power that works to bring low gigantic mountains of evil and pull down prodigious hilltops of injustice. This is the faith that keeps the nonviolent resister going through all of the tension and suffering that he must inevitably confront.

And those of us who call the name of Jesus Christ find something at the center of our faith which forever reminds us that God is on the side of truth and justice. Yes, there is an event which reminds us that Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the drums of Easter. Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy the palace and Christ a cross, but

7 Harry Emerson Fosdick, "On Being Fit to Live With," in *On Being Fit to Live With*, pp. 6-7. "Love in the New Testament is not a sentimental and affectionate emotion as we so commonly interpret it. There are three words in Greek for love, three words that we have to translate by our one word, love. *Eros*—'erotic' comes from it—that is one. *Philia*—that is another Greek word. It meant intimate personal affectionateness and friendship. But the great Christian word for love is something else: *agape*. *agape* means nothing sentimental or primarily emotional at all, it means understanding, redeeming, creative good will." King cited Paul Tillich's 1951 work *Systematic Theology* in his dissertation as another source of this concept (note 201 to King, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," in *Papers* 2: 441).

8 King refers to theologians Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), Henry Nelson Wieman (1884-1975), and Paul Johannes Tillich (1886-1965).

4 Dec 1957 one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A D and B C , so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by His name There is something in this universe which justifies Carlyle in saying, "No lie can live forever"⁹ There is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, "Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again"¹⁰ There is something in this universe that justifies James Russell Lowell in saying

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown
Stands God, within the shadows,
Keeping watch above His own¹¹

And so in Montgomery, Alabama, we can walk and never get weary because we know that there will be a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and justice¹²

I cannot close this message without saying to you that the problem of race is indeed America's greatest moral dilemma The churches are called upon to recognize the urgent necessity of taking a forthright stand on this crucial issue If we are to remain true to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we cannot rest until segregation and discrimination are banished from every area of American life I am aware of the fact that many churches have already taken a stand This great body, the National Council of Churches, has condemned segregation over and over again and has requested its constituent denominations to do likewise I am not unmindful of the fact that many individual ministers, even in the South, have stood up with dauntless courage And in passing I would like to express my personal appreciation to the ninety ministers of Atlanta, Georgia, who so courageously signed the noble statement calling for compliance with the law and an opening of the channels of communication between the races¹³

All of these things are marvelous and deserve our highest praise But we must admit that these courageous stands from the churches are still far too few The sublime statements of the major denominations on the question of human relations move all too slowly to the local churches and actual practice All too many ministers are still silent while evil rages It may well be that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition is not the glaring noisiness of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people It may be that our generation will have to repent not only for the diabolical actions and vitriolic words of the children of darkness, but

9 Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (1837)

10 Bryant, "The Battlefield" (1839)

11 Lowell, "The Present Crisis" (1844)

12 King refers to the spiritual "There's a Great Camp Meeting"

13 Eighty Atlanta ministers signed a six-point public statement on race relations in the wake of resistance to school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas The declaration called for the preservation of free speech and public school systems, obedience to the law, an end to race hatred, the maintenance of communication between races, and the use of prayer to resolve the difficulties ("Ministers List 6 Principles for Race Peace," *Atlanta Daily World*, 3 November 1957)

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also for the crippling fears and tragic apathy of the children of light. It is one of the tragedies of history that the children of darkness are often wiser in their generation, more zealous, conscientious and determined, than the children of light.¹⁴ And so I would like to call upon each of you to go away from this meeting with a restless determination to make the ideal of brotherhood a reality in this nation and all over the world.

There are certain technical words in the vocabulary of every academic discipline which tend to become clichés and stereotypes. Psychologists have a word which is probably used more frequently than any other word in modern psychology. It is the word “maladjusted.” This word is the ringing cry out of the new child psychology—“maladjusted.” Now in a sense all of us must live the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But there are some things in our social system to which I’m proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to the viciousness of mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the evils of segregation or the crippling effects of discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to an economic system that will take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. And my friends, I call upon you to be maladjusted to all of these things, for you see, it may be that the salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. The challenge of this hour is to be maladjusted. Yes, as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who in the midst of the tragic injustices of his day, could cry out in words that echo across the generations: “Let judgement run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”¹⁵ As maladjusted as Lincoln, who had the vision to see that this nation could not exist half slave and half free.¹⁶ As maladjusted as [Thomas] Jefferson, who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery, could cry out in terms lifted to cosmic proportions: “All men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Yes, as maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth, who looked at the men of his generation and said: “Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.”¹⁷ Who could stand up amid the intricate and fascinating military machinery of the Roman Empire, and say, “He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.”¹⁸

The world is in desperate need of such maladjustment. And through such courageous maladjustment, we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate mid-

¹⁴ Cf. Luke 16:8.

¹⁵ Amos 5:24.

¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln, “‘A House Divided Against Itself Cannot Stand,’ Speech in acceptance of nomination as United States Senator, made at the close of the Republican State Convention, Springfield, Ill., 16 June 1858,” in *Life and Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Marion Mills Miller (New York: Current Literature Publishing, 1907), 3:35–46.

¹⁷ Cf. Matthew 5:44.

¹⁸ Cf. Matthew 26:52. King’s discussion of “maladjustment” reflects the influence of Fosdick, who wrote of a prisoner of conscience who refused to be “well-adjusted to a state of society that denied such elemental rights as religious liberty” (*On Being a Real Person*, p. 205), Fosdick, *The Hope of the World*, p. 112. “The deepest obligation of a Christian, I should suppose, is to be maladjusted to the status quo.”

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night of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice And this will be the day when we will be able to sing by the grace of God, the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever Hallelujah, Hallelujah ¹⁹

[sustained applause]

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¹⁹ King quotes excerpts from the "Hallelujah Chorus" of Handel's oratorio *Messiah* (1741), see also Revelation 11:15