From J. Pius Barbour

Rev. M. L. King, Jr.
Dexter Avenue Baptist Church
309 South Jackson Street
Montgomery, Alabama

Dear Mike;

Can you overthrow a social system without violence? 1

Your friend,
[signed]
J. Pius Barbour

TLS. MLKP-MBU: Box 63.

1. On 15 April 1956 during the Montgomery bus boycott, Barbour, one of King’s mentors and editor of the National Baptist Voice, delivered “Can You Change a Social Order Without Violence?” at Dexter. On that occasion Barbour had argued that “the New Testament has no social strategy and the doctrine of non-resistance is strictly a personal ethic and has nothing to do with social strategy” (Barbour, “Religion in Montgomery, Alabama,” National Baptist Voice, May 1956; see also King to J. Pius Barbour, 13 March 1956, in Papers 3:171-172).
This morning I want to talk with you from a subject which rose out of our situa-
tion here in Montgomery. And it is my hope that this message will [recording in-
terrupted] [ . . . ] first book in our Holy Scripture, the last chapter in the book of
Genesis, that is the fiftieth chapter, the nineteenth and twentieth verses: "And Jo-
seph said unto them, 'Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye
thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this
day, to save much people alive.'" There is a desperate question on the lips of our
community. It is a poignant and pressing question. It is none other than the ques-
tion: What is God doing now? It seems to be a fact of life that when crisis situa-
tions develop, men turn away from the inadequate explanations of the finite, to
the adequate and eternal explanations of the infinite. The theist always wants to
know what God is thinking and what he's doing. And so somehow this morning
we wonder: Where is God while hundreds and thousands of his children suffer
merely because they are desirous of having freedom and human dignity? Where
is God while churches and homes of ministers are being plunged across the abyss
of torturous barbarity? Where is God while men stand before the world with no
respect for law and order, with respect for neither God nor man? In our moments
of despair, some of us find ourselves crying out with the earnest belief of Carlyle,
"It seems that God sits in His heaven and does nothing." 4 Others find them-
selves crying out with the great second Isaiah, "Verily, thou art a God that hideth thyself,
O God of Israel." 5 And then others begin to wonder whether or not life itself is
ultimately irrational; whether or not life is something of a jigsaw puzzle with the
decisive pieces missing; and whether life is nothing more than, as Schopenhauer
the philosopher would say, "but an endless pain with a painful end." 6

These are the things that men begin to wonder in moments of despair when
they are forced to stand amid the deep and confused waters of trouble. Where is
God while evil races? And we begin to wonder and ask: Is God no more than a sort
of cold majestic absolute, totally detached from the affairs of men? Is God no
more than the Aristotelean "unmoved mover" who merely contemplates upon
himself? Or is God a loving father concerned about his children and what hap-
pens to them? You see, this is, at bottom, the whole problem of evil, this is the
question which we are raising this morning. It is a whole question of how God op-
erates as a good God in the midst of glaring evil. This is a basic question, this is a
question that is forever on the lips of the disinherited of every generation. It is a
question that rings and echoes across the hills from the oppressed. Where is God
in the midst of falling bombs?

Now in order to fully understand the ways of God in the midst of glaring evil, it
is necessary to understand something basic about God's will. You see this morn-
ing we are talking about God's will and man's bombs. And so in order to under-
stand man's bombs, it is necessary to understand God's will. When we talk about
the will of God and the ways of God, what do we mean? In order to understand
God you've got to understand that there is something of a dualism within his will.
There are two aspects to God's will. On the one hand, God has an ultimate, ab-

4. King paraphrases Thomas Carlyle's Sartor Resartus (1836), book 2, chapter 7, paragraph 4: "Is
there no God, then; but at best an absentee God, sitting idle?"
5. Isaiah 45:15.
6. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was a German philosopher.
solute causal will. And this point God neither thinks, nor causes, nor cooperates with evil, for God has an absolute ultimate causal will which only causes good. But then there is another aspect to God's will and that is God's permissive will. Since God through his absolute ultimate causal will decided to give man freedom, he had to make it possible for evil to exist if men did not properly use their freedom. And so because of the frailties and inadequacies and sinfulness of human nature, God has to have alongside his ultimate, absolute will, a permissive will. And so God never causes evil. But sometimes he permits evil to exist in order to carry out his creative and redemptive work. That is beautifully told in that story back in Genesis which stands before us. Here was Joseph [recording interrupted] ...]

Outline, Address to MIA Mass Meeting at Bethel Baptist Church

[14 January 1957] [Montgomery, Ala.]

Returning to Montgomery after a Sunday evening address in Nashville, King delivered an emotional prayer at the MIA's regular Monday night mass meeting. After exhorting the audience to remain nonviolent—"Don't shoot back, even though it may be difficult"—he declared that if "anyone should be killed, let it be me." The press reported that King then collapsed at the pulpit and had to be led to his seat by two ministers.1 King initially disputed the news accounts: "It was simply a matter of people breaking down. ... I decided it was time to stop the prayer because the audience had gone almost to pandemonium. I shed no tears nor was I overcome with emotion. To the contrary, I was calm and balanced throughout."2 King later acknowledged having been "in the grips of an emotion I could not control" and that he, "for the first time, broke down in public."3 King had written the following outline on the verso of the program for the Birmingham Emancipation Day Celebration, at which he spoke on 1 January.

{over the last week} We have been the victims of a

I Over the last few weeks we have been the victims of the most startling and appalling expression of man's inhumanity to man. Several of our people have been needlessly beaten, one of humble ladies—an expectant mother—has been viciously shot, and to climax it all

2. "Negro Minister Questions Plan For All-White Buses," Montgomery Advertiser, 16 January 1957; see also King to Fannie E. Scott, 28 January 1957, p. 113 in this volume.
3. King also remembered that, "unexpectedly, this episode brought me great relief" (Stride Toward Freedom, p. 178).