

“For All . . . A Non-Segregated Society,”
A Message for Race Relations Sunday

10 February 1957
New York, N.Y.

King penned the following message for the National Council of Churches' thirty-fifth annual observance of Race Relations Sunday. King submitted a draft on 4 September

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1956, and by November the NCC had begun distributing the final version in a pamphlet along with twelve "Suggestions for Action" that churches could use in the struggle against segregation.¹

"... you are all one in Christ Jesus."

GALATIANS 3:28

All men, created alike in the image of God, are inseparably bound together. This is at the very heart of the Christian gospel. This is clearly expressed in Paul's declaration on Mars Hill: "... God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, ... made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, ..."² Again it is expressed in the affirmation, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The climax of this universality is expressed in the fact that Christ died for all mankind.

This broad universality standing at the center of the Gospel makes brotherhood morally inescapable.³ Racial segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we all have in Christ. Segregation is a tragic evil that is utterly un-Christian. It substitutes the person-thing relationship for the person to person relationship.⁴ The philosophy of Christianity is strongly opposed to the underlying philosophy of segregation.

Therefore, every Christian is confronted with the basic responsibility of working courageously for a non-segregated society. The task of conquering segregation is an inescapable *must* confronting the Christian churches. Much progress has been made toward the goal of a non-segregated society, but we are still far from the promised land. Segregation persists as a reality.⁵

The problem of segregated housing remains a critical one in every section of the nation. Segregated transportation facilities continue.⁶ Many communities are

1. On 13 June 1956, one day after his group sent MIA a \$1,000 donation, NCC official J. Oscar Lee thanked King for agreeing to prepare the message (Maude Ballou to Lee, 13 June 1956). Lee indicated that the NCC's Committee on Publications and Race Relations Sunday had selected the title of the message and would edit King's draft; King was to choose the scripture. Sending in King's handwritten draft a day before the 5 September deadline, Ballou informed Lee that it might need editing since King had written it "very hurriedly." On 14 September Lee thanked King for the "excellent piece of work" and sent him the edited draft. King found that the suggestions "in no way change the general idea which I am seeking to get over" (King to Lee, 24 September 1956).

2. Cf. Acts 17:24, 26.

3. In King's draft he wrote: "This broad universalism standing at the center of the gospel makes both the theory and practice of segregation morally unjustifiable."

4. In his draft King stated this point slightly differently, using Martin Buber's terms: "It substitutes the 'I-It' relationship for the 'I-Thou' relationship. The segregator relegates the segregated to the status of a thing rather than elevate him to the status of a person" (see Buber, *I and Thou* [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937]).

5. King's draft continued: "We still confront it in the south in its glaring and conspicuous forms. We still confront it in the north in its hidden and subtle forms."

6. King elaborated on this point in his draft: "... as is brought to our attention so vividly in the bus boycotts of Montgomery Alabama and Tallahassee Florida."

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complying all too slowly with the Supreme Court's decision on desegregation in the public schools.⁷ Some states have risen up in open defiance, with their legislative halls ringing loud with such words as "interposition" and "nullification" and with schemes of evasion. The churches themselves have largely failed to purge their own bodies of discriminatory practices. This evil persists in most of the local churches, church schools, church hospitals and other church institutions.

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 must not rest until segregation is banished from every area of American life.⁸

Any discussion of segregation in America against the background of moral principles emphasizes the urgent need for prophetic voices. To be sure, there are communities which are successfully integrating schools and there are courageous persons in many communities who are standing steadfastly for the principles of Christian love and justice.⁹ Nevertheless, there remains need for more people in every community to join them in crying out as Amos did, ". . . let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness like an over-flowing stream."¹⁰ Christians must decide whether they will obey the eternal demands of the Almighty God, or whether they will capitulate to the transitory demands of the defenders of segregation.¹¹

There are those who are telling us "to slow up" in the move for a non-segregated society. But the true Christian knows that it is morally wrong to accept a compromise which is designed to frustrate the fulfillment of Christian principle.¹² The time is always ripe to do right. It is true that wise restraint and calm reasonableness must prevail in the process of social change. Emotions must not run wild, and the virtues of love, patience and understanding goodwill must dominate all of our actions. But these considerations should serve to further the objective and not become a substitute for pressing on toward the goal. We face the hard challenge and the wondrous opportunity of letting the spirit of Christ work among us toward fashioning a truly Christian nation.

If we accept the challenge with more devotion and valor, we can speed the day when men everywhere will recognize that we "are all one in Christ Jesus."¹³

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7. Editors replaced King's "the south is" with "many communities are" at the beginning of this sentence.

8. Editors condensed King's original formulation of "the universal gospel which characterizes the best in our Christian tradition" into "the Gospel of Jesus Christ." King added another sentence in his draft: "It has always been the responsibility of the church to broaden horizons, challenge the status-quo, and break the mores when necessary."

9. Editors added this sentence.

10. Amos 5:24.

11. In his draft King added another sentence: "The prophets of America must speak now."

12. King's draft: "But the true Christian knows that it is morally wrong to slow up in the move toward the establishment of God's kingdom on earth."

13. King introduced this quotation from Galatians 3:28 using his familiar refrain: "If we will only accept the challenge we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice for all men. This will be the day when men everywhere will recognize that 'we are all one in Christ Jesus.'"