Acceptance Address
at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

2 May 1954

[2 May 1954]
Montgomery, Ala

Following King’s second visit to Dexter, he wrote a letter conditionally accepting the congregation’s call to be its next pastor. After a church meeting on 18 April, clerk Robert D. Nesbitt wrote to King agreeing to his conditions and asking that he conduct the church’s 2 May morning communion service. In these notes for his remarks following the service, King expresses appreciation for the call to Dexter and notes that he arrives “at a most crucial hour of our world’s history.” He humbly asserts, “I have no pretense to being a great preacher or even a profound scholar,” but adds, “I come with a feeling that I have been called to preach and to lead God’s people.”

You the people of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church have called me to serve as your pastor of your historic Church, and I have gladly accepted the call. It is with more than perfunctory gratitude that I again express my appreciation to you for bestowing upon [me?] this great honor. I accept the pastorate dreadfully aware of the tremendous responsibilities accompanying it. [strikeout illegible] Contrary to some shallow thinking, the responsibilities of the pastorate both stagger and astound the imagination. They tax the whole man.

I come to you with no pretense to infallibility.

It is a significant fact that I come to you (the pastorate) at a most crucial hour to the pastorate of Dexter at a most crucial hour of our world’s history. At a time when the flame of war might arise at any time to redden the skies of our dark and dreary world, at a time when men know all too well that without the proper guidance the whole of civilization can be plunged across the abyss of destruction; at a time when men are experiencing in all realms of life disruption and conflict, self-destruction and meaningless, despair and anxiety. Today men who were but yesterday ridiculing the Church of Christ are now asking the Church the way to the paradise of peace and happiness. We must somehow give our generation an answer. Dexter, like all other churches, must somehow lead men and women of a decadent generation to the high mountain of peace and happiness. Salvation. We must give men and women who are all but on the brink of despair, a new bent on life. I pray God that I will be able to lead Dexter in this urgent mission.

I come to you with nothing so special to offer. I have no pretense to being a great preacher or even a profound scholar. I certainly have no pretense to infallibility—that is reserved for the height of the divine rather than the depth of the human. At every moment I am conscious of my finiteness, knowing so clearly that I have never

1 King to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 14 April 1954, in Papers 2:260
2 Nesbitt to King, 19 April 1954, in Papers 2:262–263. King noted on his 26 July 1953 manuscript of “Accepting Responsibility for Your Actions” that he had also preached this sermon on 2 May 1954 at Dexter (p. 139 in this volume)
been bathed in the sunshine of omniscience or baptized in the waters of omnipotence I come to you with only the claim of being a servant of Christ, and a feeling of dependence on his grace for my leadership I come with a feeling that I have been called to preach and to lead God’s people I have felt like Jeremiah that the word of God is in heart like burning fire shut up in my bones 3 I have felt with Amos that when God speaks who can but prophesy 4 I have felt with Jesus that the spirit of Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and to set at liberty them that are bruised 5

May 1954

AD CSKC Sermon file, folder 118, “Sermon Material“

3 Cf Jeremiah 20:9
4 Cf Amos 3:8
5 Cf Luke 4:18

“Mental and Spiritual Slavery,” Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

May 1954
Montgomery, Ala

King made several trips from Boston to Montgomery before moving permanently in September 1954 For one such trip, he preached from this handwritten outline 1 King calls on his new congregation to consider Pontius Pilate, who acquiesced to the crowds and sentenced Jesus to death He criticizes conformity “Many white people are against many of the practices of their group, but they are afraid to take a stand” 2 The following outline was compiled from fragments found in two different sermon folders 3

“They are slaves who fear to speak, for the fallen and the weak, They are slaves who will not choose, Hatred, scoffing and abuse, Rather than in silence shrink,

1 King’s announced 7 September 1952 sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church was also titled “Mental and Spiritual Slavery” (“Rev King, Jr Will Deliver Last Summer Sermon Sun,” Atlanta Daily World, 6 September 1952)
3 This document’s pages were found in two separate folders in King’s sermon file The first two pages were stored in the folder titled “Mental Slavery” The last four pages were filed in an untitled folder (Sermon File Inventory, pp 609 and 621 in this volume)