

THE CHURCH ON  
THE FRONTIER OF RACIAL TENSION.

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ADDRESS GIVEN

BY  
DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

AS

ONE OF THE GAY LECTURES

SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

APRIL 19, 1961

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(Mimeographed copy taken from taped recording.)

Dr. Howington, members of the faculty, members of the student body of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, ladies and gentlemen.

I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be on the campus of this great institution of learning and to be part of this chapel period. I have looked forward to this experience with great anticipation. This isn't my first time in this chapel, so I am happy to return to the chapel again. I said to Dr. Graves coming over that when the National Baptist Convention met here some few years ago the women met on this campus. They met in this chapel, and my mother happens to be the organist of the Women's Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention, so I came over with her on two or three occasions to attend meetings right here in this chapel, so that I am very happy to be back on this campus again and to see each of you today. I always consider it a very satisfying experience to have the opportunity to discuss some of the vital issues of our day with seminary students, college and university students all over the nation, and so it is a real pleasure to have this opportunity today.

I would like to have you think with me from the subject, "The Church on the Frontier of Racial Tension." Those of us who live in the twentieth century are privileged to live in one of the most momentous periods of human history. Indeed, we have the privilege of standing between two ages: the dying old and the emerging new. An old order is passing away, and a new order is coming into being. Now we are all familiar with this old order that is passing away because we have lived with it, and we have seen it in all its dimensions. We have seen the old order in Asia and Africa, in the form of colonialism and imperialism. There are approximately two billion eight hundred million people in this world, and as you know the vast majority of these people live in Asia and Africa. Through the years they have been dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated and humiliated by foreign powers. But as Prime Minister Macmillan said a few months ago, "The wind of change began to blow," and what a mighty wind it is. We think of the fact that just fifteen years ago the British Empire had under its domination more than six hundred forty million people in Asia and Africa. Today that number has been reduced to less than sixty million. Just thirty years ago there were only three independent countries in the whole of Africa, the Union of South Africa, Ethiopia, and Liberia. When Mrs. King and I attended the independence celebration of Ghana back in 1957, there were only seven independent countries in Africa. But today that number has been increased to twenty-seven independent countries. So something is happening, a change is taking place--the old order of colonialism is passing away and the new order of freedom and human dignity is coming into being. But not only have we seen the old order on the international horizon; we have seen the old order in our own nation, in the form of segregation, in the form of discrimination.

We all know the long history of the old order in the United States. It had its beginning in 1619, when the first slaves landed on the shores of this

nation. And unlike the Pilgrim fathers who landed at Plymouth a year later, they were brought here against their wills, and throughout slavery the Negro was treated as a thing to be used, rather than a person to be respected. With the growth of slavery it became necessary to give some justification for it. It seems to be a fact of life that human beings cannot continue to do wrong without eventually reaching out for some thin rationalization to clothe an obvious wrong in the beautiful garments of righteousness.

Philosopher-psychologist, William James used to talk a great deal about the stream of consciousness. And he says that one of the interesting things about human nature, one of the unique points of human nature, is that man can temporarily block the stream of consciousness and place anything in it that he wants to. And so we can end up seeking to make the wrong right, and this is exactly what happened. Even the Bible and religion were used to give slavery moral justification. And so many argued that the Negro was inferior by nature because of Noah's curse upon the children of Ham. The Apostle Paul's dictum became a watchword, "Servants, be obedient to your master." And then one of the brethren had probably read the logic of Aristotle and he could put his argument in the framework of an Aristotelian syllogism. He could say that all men were made in the image of God, this was a major premise. Then came the minor premise, God as everybody knows is not a Negro. Then came the conclusion, therefore the Negro is not man. He could put his argument in that logical framework.

And so, living with the conditions of slavery and later segregation, many Negroes lost faith in themselves, many came to feel that perhaps they were less than human, perhaps they were inferior. But then something happened to the Negro. Circumstances made it possible and necessary for him to travel more: the coming of the automobile, the upheaval of two world wars, the great depression. And so his rural plantation background gave way to urban industrial life, his economic life was gradually rising through the growth of industry and the influence of organized labor and other agencies, and even his cultural life was rising through the steady decline of crippling illiteracy. All of these forces conjoined to cause the Negro to take a new look at himself. Negro masses all over began to re-evaluate themselves. The Negro came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him that God loves all of his children and that all men are made in his image, and that the basic thing about a man is not his specificity but his fundamentum, not the texture of his hair or the color of his skin but his eternal significance and his worth to God. And so the Negro could now unconsciously cry out with the eloquent poet:

Fleecy locks and black complexion,  
 Cannot forfeit nature's claim.  
 Skin may differ,  
     But affection dwells in black and white the same.

Were I so tall as to reach the pole,  
 Or to grasp the ocean at a span.  
 I must be measured by my soul,  
     The mind is the standard of the man.

Along with this something else happened. In 1954, on May 17, the Supreme Court of the nation rendered a decision. In 1857 the Supreme Court had

rendered the Dred Scott decision. It said in substance that the Negro was not a citizen of the United States, he was merely property subject to the dictates of his owner. In 1896 the Supreme Court had rendered the Plessy versus Ferguson decision, which established the doctrine of separate but equal as the law of the land. In 1954 the Supreme Court came out with another decision. It said in substance that old Plessy doctrine must go, that separate facilities are inherently unequal, and that to segregate a child on the basis of his race is to deny that child equal protection of the law. As a result of this decision, we stand on the threshold of one of the most creative and constructive periods in the history of our nation in the area of race relations. To put it figuratively in Biblical language, we've broken loose from the Egypt of slavery and we've moved through the wilderness of segregation, and now we stand on the border of the promised land of integration. The old order of segregation is passing away and the new order of freedom and equality is coming into being. But all people do not welcome this emerging new order. This emerging new order is not coming into being without opposition. There are some people who are very unhappy about the emerging new order, and they are determined to oppose it with all of the strength and power that they can muster. This is true in other countries; it is true in our own nation. And so we see resistance in, let us say, Johannesburg, South Africa, in northern and southern Rhodesia, in Nairobi, Kenya, and all over other sections of Africa in countries that have not received independence. We see this resistance in our own nation. At times this resistance has risen to ominous proportions. We see it in the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. We see it in the birth of white citizens councils. We hear the legislative halls of some states ringing loud with such words as interposition and nullification. All of these forces have combined to make for massive resistance. So this is something of the crisis that we face in race relations because of this resistance. Professor Sorokin of Harvard University wrote a book some years ago entitled The Crisis of Our Age, and his basic thesis was that a crisis develops in a society when an old idea exhausts itself and society seeks to reorientate itself around a new idea. This is what we see today, the old idea of paternalism, the old idea that segregation has exhausted itself; and American society is seeking to reorientate itself around the new idea of integration, of person to person relations. This is something of the crisis that we see.

Now whenever the crisis emerges in society, the church has a significant role to play. And certainly the church has a significant role to play in this period because the issue is not merely the political issue; it is a moral issue. Since the church has a moral responsibility of being the moral guardian of society, then it cannot evade its responsibility in this very tense period of transition. And so I would like to suggest some of the things that the church can do in the area of human relations, some of the things that the church can do in this tense period of transition, in order to make it possible for us to move from the old order into the new order.

First, the church must urge its worshippers to develop a world perspective. Whenever men develop a world outlook, they rise above the shackles of racial prejudice and racial hatred, and whenever we find individuals caught in the shackles of racial prejudices, they are the victims of narrow provincialism and sectionalism. So the church must urge its worshippers to rise above the narrow confines of their individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity. So you see, the world in which we live today is a world that is

geographically one. And in order to solve the problems in the days ahead, we must make it spiritually one. Now it is true that the geographical oneness of this age has come into being to a great extent through man's scientific ingenuity. Man through his scientific genius has been able to dwarf distance and place time in chains. Yes, we have been able to carve highways through the stratosphere. And our jet planes have compressed into minutes distances that once took days and months.

I think Bob Hope has adequately described this new jet age in which we live-- and certainly it isn't the usual and common thing for a Christian preacher to be quoting Bob Hope, but he has so adequately described the jet age that I have to mention it. He said it is an age in which it is possible to take a non-stop flight from Los Angeles you develop hiccups, you will hic in Los Angeles and cup in New York City. That's really moving pretty fast!

You know it is true, because of the time difference, to take a non-stop flight from Tokyo, Japan, to Seattle, Washington--taking the flight from Tokyo on Sunday morning, you will arrive in Seattle, Washington, on the preceding Saturday night; and when your friends meet you at the airport and ask, "When did you leave Tokyo," you will have to say, "I left tomorrow." That's the kind of age in which we live.

Now this is a bit humorous, but I'm trying to laugh a basic fact into all of us. And it is simply this: that the world in which we live is geographically one. Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood. It is urgently true that now we are challenged through our spiritual and moral commitments to make of this world a brotherhood. In a real sense we must all live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We must see this sense of dependence, this sense of interdependence. No individual can live alone, no nation can live alone; we are made to live together.

A few months ago Mrs. King and I journeyed over to that great country known as India. I never will forget the experience. It was a rich and rewarding experience to have the opportunity of talking with the great leaders of the nation, to talk with the people and to visit with them in the cities and in the villages. This experience will remain meaningful to me as long as the cords of memory shall lengthen. This morning I say to you that there were those depressing moments. For how can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes millions of people going to bed hungry tonight? How can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes millions of people sleeping on the sidewalks of Calcutta every night. More than six hundred thousand people sleep on the sidewalks of Bombay every night. How can one avoid being depressed when he discovers that out of India's population of four hundred million people, more than three hundred seventy million make an annual income of less than sixty dollars a year. Most of these people have never seen a doctor or dentist. As I observed these conditions, something within me cried out, "Can we in America stand idly by and not be concerned?" Then an answer came, "Oh no!" The destiny of the United States is tied up with the destiny of India and other nations, and I started thinking about the fact that in our country we spend more than a million dollars a day to store surplus foods. I found myself saying, I know where we can store that food free of charge, in the wrinkled stomachs of the hundreds and millions of people who go to bed hungry tonight.

Maybe we have spent far too much of our national budget establishing military bases around the world rather than establishing bases of genuine concern and understanding. All I am saying is simply this: that all life is inter-related. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. As long as there is extreme poverty in the world, no man can be totally rich even if he has a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people cannot expect to live more than 30 or 32 years, no man can be totally healthy even if he just got a clean bill of health from the finest clinic in the country. Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality. John Donne caught it years ago and placed it in graphic terms, "No man is an island entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Then he goes on toward the end to say, "Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." The church must get this over in every community, in every section of this nation, in every country of this world. And also the church must make it palatably clear that segregation is a moral evil which no Christian can accept. Segregation is still the Negroes' burden and America's shame. The church must make it clear that if we are to be true witnesses of Jesus Christ, we can no longer give our allegiance to a system of segregation. Segregation is wrong because it substitutes an I-It relationship for the I-Thou relationship. Segregation is wrong because it relegates persons to the status of things. Segregation is wrong because it does something to the personality; it damages the soul. It often gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and it gives the segregated a false sense of inferiority.

And so the underlying philosophy of segregation is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of Christianity, and democracy and all of the dialectics of the logician cannot make them lie down together. The church must make this very clear. The church also has the responsibility of getting to the ideational roots of racial prejudice. Racial prejudice is always derived from or based on fears, and suspicions and misunderstandings that are usually groundless. The church can do a great deal to direct the popular mind at this point, and to clear up these misunderstandings and these false ideas. Many of these ideas are disseminated by politicians who merely use the issue to arouse the fears and to perpetuate themselves in office. The church can make it clear that these things are not true. The church can rise up and through its channels of religious education tell the truth on this issue. The church can say to men everywhere that the idea of an inferior or a superior race is a false idea that has been refuted by the best evidence of the anthropological scientists. They tell us that there are no superior races or no inferior races. There may be superior individuals academically and inferior individuals academically in all races. The church can make it clear that the Negro is not inherently criminal. The church can say that poverty and ignorance breed crime, whatever the racial group may be; that these things are environmental and not racial. The church can make it clear that if there are lagging standards within the Negro community they lag because of segregation and discrimination, and that it is a tortuous logic to use the tragic results of segregation as an argument for the continuation of it.

Then the church can reveal to the nation the true intentions of the Negro. (

The church can make it clear that the Negro is not seeking to dominate the nation politically; he is not seeking to overthrow anything; he is not seeking to upset the social structure of the nation; but he is merely seeking to create a moral balance within society so that all men can live together as brothers. The church can make it clear that all of the talk about intermarriage and all of the fears that come into being on the subject are groundless fears. Properly speaking, individuals marry, and not races. And people, in the final analysis, in a democracy must have the freedom to marry anybody they want to marry. And so no state should have laws prohibiting this. But even in spite of guaranteeing this freedom, the church can make it clear that the basic aim of the Negro is to be the white man's brother and not his brother-in-law. This can be made clear.

So there are many false ideas that are constantly disseminated that the church can do a great deal to refute. And then the church can do a great deal to open channels of communication between the races. I am absolutely convinced that men hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don't know each other. They don't know each other because they are separated from each other. No greater tragedy can befall society than the attempt to live in monologue rather than dialogue. The church has the responsibility to open the channels of communication.

Then, also, the church must not only clarify the ideas, but it must move out into the realm of social reform. [The church must develop an action program. Wherever there is injustice in society, the church must take a stand.] Let us think of some of these injustices.

There is a problem of economic justice. Forty-three percent of the Negro families of America still make less than \$2,000 a year, while just seventeen percent of the white families of America make less than \$2,000 a year. Twenty-one percent of the Negro families of America make less than \$1,000 a year while just six percent of the white families of America make less than \$1,000 a year. Eighty-eight percent of the Negro families of America make less than \$5,000 a year, while just sixty percent of the white families of America make less than \$5,000 a year. Now the church can take a stand on this issue. The Negro is still the last hired and first fired. And in these days of automation he is the first one to suffer because he has been given positions where he is limited to unskilled and semi-skilled labor. He is prevented from going into apprenticeship training where he can develop these skills. So the church must make it clear that if we are to solve the problem and to create better conditions in society these economic conditions must be equalized. And I could mention many other areas in which the church must go out and take a stand.

Where there is segregation in any area the church must be willing to stand up with an action program. One of the best ways that the church can do this is to remove the yoke of segregation from its own body. Oh, it has been said many times, and I am forced to repeat it, it is tragic indeed that the church is the most segregated major institution in America. It is tragic indeed that on Sunday morning at 11 o'clock when we stand to sing "In Christ There is No East or West," we stand in the most segregated hour of Christian America. So often in the church we've had a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds. But thank God we are beginning now to shake the lethargy from our souls, and we

are coming to see that if we are to be true followers of Jesus Christ we must stand up and solve this problem.

So here and there churches are courageously integrating their congregations. Here and there many ministerial groups are standing up in communities, standing up with conviction and courage. All of this is encouraging. But we must admit that these cases, these examples are far from few. We must admit that the noble pronouncements of the major denominations on the question of integration have filtered down all too slowly to the local congregation. And now there is the need to get every local church, every local congregation, to stand up on this issue. Because it will be one of the great tragedies of history, as historians in future years will be able to write at the height of the twentieth century that the Christian church proved to be the last bulwark of segregated power.

There is another thing, a fine thing that the church must do. The church must urge all men to enter the new age with understanding, creative good will in the hearts. This is true for everybody. This is true for those who have been on the oppressor end of the old order and those who have been on the oppressed end. Those who have been on the oppressor end must go into this new age with a sense of penitence, with a real sense of understanding. They must search their souls to be sure that they have removed every vestige of prejudice and bigotry, and that they have moved away from any philosophy of white supremacy. If they fail to do this, many tragedies will occur and the new age which is emerging will have many problems to solve in future years. But not only that. I would not limit myself to saying what the white man must do in order to make this new order possible. I have tried to make it clear in the last few years that the Negro himself must go into this new age with understanding, redemptive good will in his heart. I have said over and over again that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for first-class citizenship, but we must never use second-class methods to gain it. Of course I know, and you know, the temptations which we face--those of us who have been trampled over so long, those of us who have been victims of lynching mobs, those of us who have seen with our own eyes police brutality, those of us who have seen so many tragic conditions that tended to destroy our personhood. There is the temptation that we will enter the new age with bitterness in our hearts. But I am convinced that if this happens, the new order which is emerging will be nothing but a duplicate of the old order. Somebody must have sense in this world, somebody must have religion in this world--sense enough to meet physical force with soul force, sense enough to meet hate with love. This is why I believe so firmly in non-violence as the way out. And I am convinced that if the Negro succumbs to the temptation of using violence in his struggle for justice, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and our chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.

There is still a voice crying through the vistas of time, saying to every potential Peter, "Put up your sword." History is replete with the bleached bones of nations. History is cluttered with the wreckage of communities that failed to follow this command. So I will say over and over again that our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win friendship and understanding. We must come to see that it is possible to stand up with courage. Stand up with as much fear and courage and determination, organizing in mass action to break down the system of segregation, and yet not going to the point of hating and using violence in the process. There is this other way. So



if we will but follow this way, I think we too will be able to aid in bringing this new order into being.

Now many people ask me over and over again what do you mean when you say, "Love these people who are oppressing you, these people who will bomb your home and threaten your children and seek to block your desires and aspirations for freedom"; what do you mean when you say "Love them!" I always have to stop and try to define the meaning of love in this context. Fortunately the Greek language comes to our aid at this point. You know there are three words in the Greek language for love. There is the word eros, and eros is a sort of aesthetic love. Plato talks about it a great deal in his Dialogue, the yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine. It has come to us to be sort of a romantic love. So in this sense we all know about eros. We have read about it in the beauties of literature; we have experienced it in our own lives. Then the Greek language talks about philos which is another level of love, so to speak. This friendship. This is the sort of reciprocal love. On this level we love because we are loved. It is intimate affection between personal friends. We love those people that we like. Then the Greek language comes out with another word, calls it agape. Agape is more than aesthetic or romantic love. Agape is more than friendship. Agape is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all men. It is an over-flowing love that seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. And so when one rises to love at this point, he loves men not because he likes them, not because their ways appeal to him; but he loves every man because God loves him. He rises to the point that he is able to love the person who does evil deed, while hating the deed that the person does. I think that this is what Jesus meant when he said, "Love your enemies," and I am so happy that he didn't say, "Like your enemies," because it is difficult to like some people. It is difficult to like what some people are doing to us. It is difficult to like somebody who bombs your home or somebody who is threatening your children. It is difficult to like them, but Jesus says, "Love them." And love greater than like. Like is sentimental and affectionate, but love is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all men. And I believe that this is the type of love that must guide us through this period of transition. And with this we will be able to enter the new age with the proper attitude. We will not seek to rise from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage, thus subverting justice. We will not seek to substitute one tyranny for another. I am firmly convinced that black supremacy is as dangerous as white supremacy. God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men and brown men and yellow men, but God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race. The creation of a society where every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. So I believe that this is what we can learn from the church, and this is what the church has been teaching in an amazing way. And it must continue to get this over in this very important period of our history. And if we will but do these things, we will be able to move in the great days ahead. Let us realize that the problem will not just work itself out, we have the responsibility of helping to work it out. It will not be solved until men and women all over this nation are willing to stand up with a sort of divine discontent

You know there are certain technical words in every academic discipline, and pretty soon they become a part of the technical nomenclature of that discipline. There is a word that is used in modern psychology, probably used

more than any other word in modern psychology. It is the word maladjusted. It is the ringing cry of modern child psychology, maladjusted. And certainly I want to live the well-adjusted life, and I'm sure all of you want to live the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities.

But if you will allow the preacher in me to come out now, I would like to say to you that there are some things within our social system of which I am proud to be maladjusted, to which I call upon all men of good will to be maladjusted. I never intend to become adjusted to the evils of segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. I think that all men of good will must be maladjusted to all of these things for it may well be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. So let us be as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, "Let justice run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream"; as maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln, who had the vision to see that this nation could <sup>not</sup> exist half slave and half free; as maladjusted as Thomas Jefferson, who, in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery, could cry out in words lifted to cosmic proportion, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"; as maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth, who could look into the faces of the men and women of his generation and say, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them which despitefully use you." I am convinced that the world is in desperate need of such maladjustment.

And in conclusion, let me say that we must have faith in the future, the faith to believe that we can solve this problem, the faith to believe that as we struggle to solve this problem we do not struggle alone. But we have cosmic companionship. Oh, before the victory is won, some people may have to get scarred up. Before the victory for brotherhood is won, some people like Paul and Peter will have to go to jail. Before the victory for brotherhood is won, there will be others who will have to be called bad names, who will have to be misunderstood and misrepresented and misquoted. Before the victory is won, some will have to lose jobs and suffer and sacrifice. Who will be a part of that creative minority that will stand firm on an issue will help us bring into being the Kingdom of God, knowing that in the process, God struggles with us. The God that we worship is not some Aristotelian Unmoved Mover who merely contemplates upon himself. The God that we worship is not merely a self-knowing God, but he is an ever-loving God, working through history for the salvation of man. So with this faith we can move on.

There is something at the center of our faith which reminds us of this-- we celebrated the event a few Sundays ago--something that reminds us that Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumph and beat of the drums of Easter. Yes, there is something in our faith to remind us that even though evil, at times, will so shape events--Caesar will occupy the palace and Christ the cross--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 Carlisle in saying, "No lie can live forever." There is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." There is something in this universe which 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  
 Standeth God within the shadows, keeping watch above his own.

*Bapt  
Hymn  
#*

And so with this faith we move out into the vast possibilities of the future, and if we will go on with this faith and this determination to struggle; we will be able to bring into being this society of brotherhood, transforming the jangling discords of our southland into a beautiful symphony of peaceful relationships, and this will be the day, figuratively speaking, "the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy."