The BOISI CENTER for
RELIGION and AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Symposium on Religion and Politics

Religious Freedom and Racial Justice

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history of experiencing racial, political, and socioeconomic injustice. For instance, Frederick Douglass was first and foremost an abolitionist and civil rights activist. Fighting against his own slavery from his earliest youth, he continued to fight against the institution of slavery until its abolition. He spoke and lectured widely for the abolitionist cause throughout the 1840s and 1850s. In 1851, he organized his own series of lectures in Rochester, which focused on social justice for blacks in America. In addition to advocating abolition in his lectures and in his publications, Douglass became active in the Underground Railroad, and was instrumental in shepherding many fugitive slaves to Canada.

Douglass continued to fight tirelessly for African American rights to full legal equality, backed by the power of the ballot. He supported passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and lectured widely for their adoption. In later years, he even spoke out against the increased lynchings of African Americans. For Douglass, social justice for blacks was essential to America making good on its promise as a land of equality and opportunity for *all*. Social justice not only includes political equality but also economic equity. Social justice for African Americans was essential and remains essential to their equal participation and flourishing within our American democratic context.

A third and final broad tenet or moral paradigm that guides African American ethics is intragroup equality and fairness. Intragroup equality refers to the type of parity that exists among members within a particular community or group. Although African American thinkers have advocated for social equality among ethnic groups, other thinkers have advocated for social equality among members *within* a particular ethnic community or group. For instance, Maria Stewart was the first-known African American woman to publicly lecture to audiences that included both women and men. Stewart wrote for the *Liberator*, a paper that was very influential in changing attitudes about slavery in the United States. However, she wrote about the overt sexism that existed not only in American society but also within black communities. In response to the repressive sexism that women—and in particular, black women—endured within black communities, she poses a particular question in one of her writings. She asks, "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?" This question affirms the need for black women to experience social equality and equity within black communities who are also oppressed by racial inequality.

KEY TERM 6.5

Intragroup equality. The type of parity that exists among members within a particular community or group.

Stewart encouraged women not to be dependent on men, and to start their own businesses. She thought women should rely only on themselves to change things in society. Unfortunately, black woman writing at that time were scorned, and she was forced to leave the city due to the violent reaction to her writings, which even came from black men. Stewart emphasized a moral paradigm that promoted equality among members within the same community—namely, equality between men and women.

Major Black Figures: Visions of Liberation

Being guided by these three aforementioned broad tenets or moral paradigms, African American theological and religious figures and scholars have articulated visions of liberation that address oppressive structures such as racism, advanced

capitalism, and patriarchy. Although a number of figures have been important to black liberation, two black religious figures are come to the forefront: Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. More recent black theological and religious thinkers have also offered visions of black liberation. Three primary African American religious scholars that are explored include James Cone, Delores Williams, and Cornel West. Ideas of black liberation are certainly not reduced to these particular figures and thinkers. However, the aforementioned scholars and figures illuminate the major issues and questions that African American liberative ethics wrestles with.

Deeply influenced by Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is one of the primary major black religious figure who confronted racism in America. From 1960 until his death in 1968, he was co-pastor with his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church and president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (which he also helped found). King was a pivotal figure in the civil rights movement. He was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization that was responsible for the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott from 1955 to 1956 (381 days). He was arrested thirty times for his participation in civil rights activities.

King was a vital personality of the modern era and one of the greatest African American figures to challenge racist and capitalist structures. King's commitment to nonviolence in the face of racist hatred and capitalist exploitation gave black people and poor people a new sense of worth and dignity. His lectures and questions on the inequality and irrationality of racist hatred stirred the concern and sparked the conscience of a generation. His philosophy of nonviolent direct action against racial segregation in America reflects his wrestling with the rationalization of racial hatred. For King, racial hatred legitimated and codified in laws not only reflected social inequality but also undermined the innate human dignity all persons possessed, dictating that all be treated as equal.

KEY TERM 6.6

Black Liberation. Social, political, economic, and psychological liberation for black communities from oppressive institutions and ideologies within a context of hegemony and domination.

King's commitment to addressing the legality and irrationality of American racism was central to the strategies that would be employed within the civil rights movement during the 1960s. His nonviolent strategies for rational and nondestructive social change galvanized the conscience of the United States and reordered its priorities. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, for example, went to Congress as a result of the Selma to Montgomery march. His wisdom, his words, his actions, his commitment, and his dreams for equal opportunity and racial integration helped America make good on its promise as a land of liberty for all. However, while legislation was being passed in order to dismantle racial segregation in the 1960s, King knew all too well that racist ideologies and practices continued to guide and inform America's political, economic, and social institutions. Consequently, near the end of King's life, he continued to maintain that America had still not fully addressed its own racist demons and racial bigotry.

King wrestled with questions concerning methods of challenging and eradicating racial hostility and bigotry within American institutions. He pondered two specific questions. How do we, as a society, define an unjust law, and what kinds of strategies and tactics have proven most effective in changing such laws? If we are able to abolish legal injustice, will it necessarily result in social justice? These questions reject arguments that see racial injustice being achieved merely through laws. While laws were needed to end

racial segregation, King knew all too well that racism is also about the bigoted attitudes and ideologies that white people possessed. Visions of racial justice also entailed changing minds and hearts. And this task proved far more insurmountable than legal solutions to racial injustice. Even up to his death, King felt that America still had a long way to go in ridding itself of its racist inclinations and predispositions. However, King felt that only nonviolence and love coupled with justice could win the day and usher in visions of liberation for blacks that could be sustainable.

Another black religious figure that also proffered visions of black liberation was Malcolm X. Intelligent and articulate, Malcolm was appointed a minister and national spokesman for the Nation of Islam by the group's leader, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. He was appointed to establish new mosques in cities such as Detroit, Michigan, and Harlem, New York. Malcolm utilized newspaper columns, radio, and television to communicate the Nation of Islam's message across the United States. His charisma, drive, and conviction attracted an astounding number of new members. In fact, Malcolm was largely credited with increasing membership in the Nation of Islam from five hundred in 1952 to thirty thousand in 1963.

Fig. 6.2. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X meet before a press conference. Both men had come to hear the Senate debate on the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This was the only time the two men ever met; their meeting lasted only one minute.

A contemporary of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X vehemently spoke against American racist institutions and structures as well. However, Malcolm discussed racism in different terms than King. For King, nonviolence and love were the primary means and methods toward the ends of racial justice. For Malcolm, black liberation was not about blacks trying to integrate with whites in the name of "community" or "brotherly love." For Malcolm, violent resistance through continued segregation was the primary means toward black self-love and self-determination. Black liberation, in other words, could only be achieved through Black Nationalism—the reinvigoration of black self-love and pride in their history and way of life. As a self-determined community and people, then, they could demand equal rights and liberties.

Malcolm did not think that black self-determination could be achieved through integratiion with whites (which for him was more about seeking white approval). He possessed a vision of black liberation that was controversial because it wrestled with a key question: Could America ever be a land of equality and opportunity when racism was stitched into the fabric of America's way of life? For Malcolm, American racism was not merely an aberration or anomaly within American life. Racism was a part of America's very identity, an identity it possessed when it built itself upon the backs of African slaves. Consequently, Malcolm believed that whites could never partner with blacks to achieve liberation.

Inevitably, many white people (and many blacks) were alarmed by Malcolm X's segregationist

BOX 6.2

Black Nationalism

Black Nationalism was a political and social movement prominent among some African Americans in the 1960s and early 1970s. The movement, which can be traced back to Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association of the 1920s, sought to acquire economic power and to infuse among blacks a sense of community and group feeling. Many adherents to Black Nationalism assumed the eventual creation of a separate black nation by African Americans. As an alternative to being assimilated by the American nation, which is predominantly white, Black Nationalists sought to maintain and promote their separate identity as a proud, self-sufficient black nation.

perspective on black liberation. He and the Nation of Islam were described as hatemongers, black segregationists, violence-seekers, and a threat to improved race relations. Civil rights organizations denounced Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam as irresponsible extremists whose views were not representative of African Americans. Malcolm X was equally critical of the civil rights movement. He described its leaders as "stooges" for the white establishment, and said that Martin Luther King Jr. was a "chump." He criticized the 1963 March on Washington, calling it "the farce on Washington." He said he did not know why black people were excited over a demonstration "run by whites in front of a statue of a president who has been dead for a hundred years and who didn't like us when he was alive."

However, as King's views evolved near the end of his life, Malcolm also went through a transformation of his perspective on how to achieve black liberation in America. This shift from "white man as devil" began to occur when he took a pilgrimage to Mecca, where he began to reappraise the "white man." In the Muslim world, Malcolm observed that men with white complexions were more genuinely brotherly than many of his black brothers from the Nation of Islam. White men in Mecca embraced other men of dark hues as brothers and not as inferior beings. Malcolm said there were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world, of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But all were participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that his experiences in America had led him to believe could never exist between the white and the nonwhite person.

He maintained that America needed to understand Islam, because it is the one religion that erases the race problem from its society. Throughout his travels in the Muslim world, he met, talked to, and even ate with people who in America would have been considered white, but the "white" attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. Malcolm commented that he had never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all, regardless of their color.

This experience in Mecca started a radical transformation of Malcolm's entire perspective on "white men" in relation to black liberation. He learned that the "white man" in America was less about complexion and more about racist attitudes and actions toward the black man and all other nonwhite people. Consequently, Malcolm no longer saw all white people as intrinsically evil. Rather, he saw white people in America as socially conditioned by the insidious practice of racism. Before his assassination, Malcolm saw whites as partners in the struggle for black liberation and black self-determination (although whites could not be leaders within this struggle).

Although they both primarily focused on challenging racist institutions and structures, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X also critiqued

Fig. 6.3. March on Washington, DC, 1963.

American capitalist exploitation that poor blacks and other nonwhites experienced in America and around the world. They both castigated economic militarism, which continues to be promoted by America around the globe. Although major African American figures are not to be reduced to Martin and Malcolm, both leaders illuminate the central questions black people have wrestled with in relation to black liberation and determination.

Black Scholars: Visions of Liberation

Black scholars use a multitude of methods in describing ideas of black liberation: theological, philosophical, ethnographic, and social-scientific, among others. This chapter highlights theological and philosophical methods, as scholarly discourses on black liberation primarily emerged out of the humanities and social sciences.

African American theological and religious thinkers have challenged racist ideologies and structures in America. Black theologian James Cone is a religious scholar who has written

KEY TERM 6.7

Racism. The belief that there are inherent differences in people's traits and capacities, which are entirely due to their race or ethnicity, however defined, and which consequently justify those people's being treated differently and unequally at both personal and institutional levels.

MARTIN L. KING - "I HAVE A DREAM" SPEECH

(AUGUST 28, 1963)

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon of hope to millions of slaves, who had been seared in the flames of whithering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But one hundred years later, the colored America is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the colored American is still sadly crippled by the manacle of segregation and the chains of discrimination.

One hundred years later, the colored American lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the colored American is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we have come to our Nation's Capital to cash a check. When the architects of our great republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every Anerican was to fall heir.

This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed to the inalienable rights of life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given its colored people a bad check, a check that has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice.

We have also come to his hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is not time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.

Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy.

Now it the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.

Now it the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

Now is the time to make justice a reality to all of God's children.

I would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment and to underestimate the determination of it's colored citizens. This sweltering summer of the colored people's legitimate

discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end but a beginning. Those who hope that the colored Americans needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual.

There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the colored citizen is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.

We cannot be satisfied as long as the colored person's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one.

We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "for white only."

We cannot be satisfied as long as a colored person in Mississippi cannot vote and a colored person in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote.

No, no we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of your trials and tribulations. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by storms of persecutions and staggered by the winds of police brutality.

You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our modern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you, my friends, we have the difficulties of today and tomorrow.

I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day out in the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; that one day right down in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be engulfed, every hill shall be exalted and every mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plains and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.

With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to climb up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my father's died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!"

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. So let freedom ring from the hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado.

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that, let freedom, ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi and every mountainside.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every tenement and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual, "Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

AFRICAN STUDIES CENTER - UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

"Letter from a Birmingham Jail [King, Jr.]"

16 April 1963
My Dear Fellow Clergymen:
While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self purification; and direct action. We have gone through all these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

Then, last September, came the opportunity to talk with leaders of Birmingham's economic community. In the course of the negotiations, certain promises were made by the merchants--for example, to remove the stores' humiliating racial signs. On the basis of these promises, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to a moratorium on all demonstrations. As the weeks and months went by, we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. A few signs, briefly removed, returned; the others remained. As in so many past experiences, our hopes had been blasted, and the shadow of deep disappointment settled upon us. We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self purification. We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?" We decided to schedule our direct action program for the Easter season, realizing that except for Christmas, this is the main shopping period of the year. Knowing that a strong economic-withdrawal program would be the by product of direct action, we felt that this would be the best time to bring pressure to bear on the merchants for the needed change.

Then it occurred to us that Birmingham's mayoral election was coming up in March, and we speedily decided to postpone action until after election day. When we discovered that the Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor, had piled up enough votes to be in the run off, we decided again to postpone action until the day after the run off so that the demonstrations could not be used to cloud the issues. Like many others, we waited to see Mr. Connor defeated, and to this end we endured postponement after postponement. Having aided in this community need, we felt that our direct action program could be delayed no longer.

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely. Some have asked: "Why didn't you give the new city administration time to act?" The only answer that I can give to this query is that the new Birmingham administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one, before it will act. We are sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Albert Boutwell as mayor will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is a much more gentle person than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to maintenance of the status quo. I have hope that Mr. Boutwell will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this without pressure from devotees of civil rights. My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I it" relationship for an "I thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances,

for they are morally wrong.

Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal. Let me give another explanation. A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First-Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.

I hope you are able to see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws.

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the

South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical inquiries precipitated the act by the misguided populace in which they made him drink hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because his unique God consciousness and never ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see that, as the federal courts have consistently affirmed, it is wrong to urge an individual to cease his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest may precipitate violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber. I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time in relation to the struggle for freedom. I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist. I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle-class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation, the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. Nourished by the Negro's frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination, this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible "devil."

I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the "do nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle. If this philosophy had not emerged, by now many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood. And I am further convinced that if our white

brothers dismiss as "rabble rousers" and "outside agitators" those of us who employ nonviolent direct action, and if they refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies--a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare.

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. If one recognizes this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand why public demonstrations are taking place. The Negro has many pent up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides -and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history. So I have not said to my people: "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist. But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . ." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime--the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this need. Perhaps I was too optimistic; perhaps I expected too much. I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers in the South have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still all too few in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some -such as Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden, James McBride Dabbs, Ann Braden and Sarah Patton Boyle--have written about our struggle in eloquent and prophetic terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They have languished in filthy, roach infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of policemen who view them as "dirty nigger-lovers." Unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, they have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful "action" antidotes to combat the disease of segregation. Let me take note of my other major disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some significant stands on this issue. I commend you, Reverend Stallings, for your Christian stand on this past Sunday, in welcoming Negroes to your worship service on a nonsegregated basis. I commend the Catholic leaders of this state for integrating Spring Hill College several years ago.

But despite these notable exceptions, I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.

There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators."' But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak,

ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent--and often even vocal--sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

Perhaps I have once again been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone down the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been dismissed from their churches, have lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment. I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are at present misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation -and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands. Before closing I feel impelled to mention one other point in your statement that has troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence." I doubt that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen if you were to observe their ugly and inhumane treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you were to watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you were to see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you were to observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I cannot join you in your praise of the Birmingham police department.

It is true that the police have exercised a degree of discipline in handling the demonstrators. In this sense they have conducted themselves rather "nonviolently" in public. But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the past few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Perhaps Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather nonviolent in public, as was Chief Pritchett in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of racial injustice. As T. S. Eliot has said: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason."

I wish you had commended the Negro sit inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day the South

will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy two year old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: "My feets is tired, but my soul is at rest." They will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience' sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written so long a letter. I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.
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< Lost Malcolm X Speech Heard Again 50 Years Later

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Transcript

GUY RAZ, HOST:

Our next story came to us from Malcolm Burnley. He's a senior at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. And last semester, he took a narrative writing course, and one of the assignments was to write a fictional story based on something true, but that true event had to be found inside the university archives.

MALCOLM BURNLEY: So I went to the archives and started flipping through dusty compilations of student newspapers, and there was this old black and white photo of when Malcolm X came to speak, but there was one short article that corresponded to it and very little else.

RAZ: May 11, 1961, Malcolm X came to speak at Brown University. And Malcolm Burnley noticed that at the end of that story, there was a brief mention of another article, also from the Brown student newspaper, this one written by a senior named Katharine Pierce. And her essay was the reason Malcolm X wanted to visit Brown.

BURNLEY: So I immediately started asking her what she remembered about provoking Malcolm X to come, as the paper said, and she slowly started remembering the story of what happened.

KATHARINE PIERCE: I just felt that integration was a better path, more reasonable and with a greater chance of success.

RAZ: That is Katharine Pierce. Today, she lives about an hour north of New York City. When she was a student in 1961, she believed the Nation of Islam's message of separation of the races was destructive. So she wrote a detailed critique, and somehow, it caught the attention of the Nation of Islam.

BURNLEY: Then about two weeks after, representatives of the Nation of Islam called the Brown Daily Herald. They said that Malcolm X wanted to come to Brown to defend his views because Katharine's essay was so critical of the organization.

PIERCE: Well, I think we were quite astonished.

RAZ: The editor of the student newspaper was a 19-year-old named Richard Holbrooke. Yes, that Richard Holbrooke, the late legendary diplomat.

BURNLEY: Holbrooke and his staff agreed with the Nation of Islam that they would like to have Malcolm here, but then the trick was convincing the university administration.

RAZ: The university was worried - worried about possible violence, worried about upsetting the NAACP, which had pressured other universities, including UC Berkeley and Howard, the historically black university, to prevent Malcolm X from speaking on their campuses that year. Holbrooke met Brown president Barnaby Keeney at least six times to try and convince him.

KATI MARTON: Richard, as usual, said, what have we got to be afraid of? It's better that we let him speak, and it's better that the students make up their own minds than that we shut him out.

RAZ: Kati Marton is Richard Holbrooke's widow. According to Malcolm Burnley, Holbrooke took a hard line with the administration. If they didn't agree to allow Malcolm X to speak at Brown, Holbrooke would move the student newspaper off campus and break its ties to the university.

MARTON: But in typical Holbrooke fashion, he prevailed. He used to recall walking with Malcolm X and his gigantic bodyguards from Richard's office in the Brown Daily Herald to the auditorium where the students waited. And that walk left a deep impression on Richard who, even as a 19-year-old, was already a budding historian.

RAZ: Katharine Pierce, who wrote the essay that prompted the visit, recently unearthed a recording of that night, a recording she kept in a box in her attic for 50 years. This is the first time it has ever been broadcast, an extraordinary historical record, an early window into Malcolm X's evolving views and the young future diplomat who would bring him to campus. Here, then, is 19-year-old Richard Holbrooke.

RICHARD HOLBROOKE: On behalf of the Brown Daily Herald, I welcome you all to Sayles Hall. Tonight, we present two different viewpoints on the American Negro and his future.

BURNLEY: Malcolm X and his entourage purchased 200 tickets for Nation of Islam members from Boston to train down. So you can hear in the audience, there is between 100 and 200 Nation of Islam members in attendance.

RAZ: Katharine Pierce was allowed to make a brief statement right after Richard Holbrooke.

PIERCE: For those of us who feel that the Negro is an integral part of our culture and who advocate for integration because we believe in the equality of all men, the Black Muslims are an indication of the fact that we have not done enough acting to make our position acceptable to the Negro dissatisfied with his present situation.

RAZ: And a few minutes later, she introduced the main speaker.

PIERCE: I now turn the platform over to Minister Malcolm X Shabazz.

(SOUNDBITE OF APPLAUSE)

MALCOLM X: Mr. Moderator, Ms. Pierce, and to the Brown Daily Herald, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters - that takes in everybody.

RAZ: Malcolm X was supposed to debate a representative from the NAACP that night. He was representing the Nation of Islam, of course, and its leader, Elijah Muhammad. But in the last minute, the NAACP representative Herbert Wright backed out.

BURNLEY: So kind of on the fly, Malcolm had to prepare a speech for that evening, and he reveals a lot of his ideology and positions that are dated to years later in his life.

MALCOLM X: So the question today is, is the Honorable Elijah Muhammad a bona fide religious leader, and are his followers a bona fide religious group? And this is a question that America has got to come face-to-face with.

BURNLEY: At several points, you hear raucous applause, clearly from the Nation of Islam members, based on the point that Malcolm X makes.

(SOUNDBITE OF APPLAUSE)

BURNLEY: And other points you hear, he kind of plays to the white audience and he gets them laughing.

MALCOLM X: They don't have a history of their own, so they let you tell them what their history is, and that, in essence, is that you found him in the jungle someplace with a spear chasing white people in a cannibalistic way to try and give the impression that white meat is the only good meat to eat.

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

BURNLEY: And you also hear gasps at certain points in the recording at a few moments.

MALCOLM X: No follower of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad partakes of any alcoholic beverage, narcotic, reefers or tobacco, which is prevalent in the Negro communities across the country, even right here in the city of Providence. He has reformed us of these things, and we used to do all of them abundantly. I myself was one of the foremost practicers or doers of everything that I've mentioned here so far and the teaching - I'm telling you the truth - and the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad stopped me from doing these things overnight.

BURNLEY: At several points, he references the 725 million Muslims across the world versus the 20 million so-called Negroes in America.

MALCOLM X: There are 20 million so-called Negroes here in America, 20 million ex-slaves, 20 million second-class citizens. No matter what other classification you try and put on them, you can't deny that we are ex-slaves. You can't deny that we are second-class citizens.

BURNLEY: And the Nation of Islam refused the term Negro. They said it was the white man's classification of black Americans. So that's

why he said so-called Negro.

RAZ: Malcolm Burnley interviewed dozens of people who witnessed the speech that night, and they all recalled being riveted, even if they didn't agree with what Malcolm X had to say. Here's Katharine Pierce again.

PIERCE: He read his audience very, very well, as a fine public speaker does.

MALCOLM X: And we who follow the Honorable Elijah Muhammad feel that when you try and pass integration laws here in America, forcing white people to pretend that they are accepting black people, what you are doing is making white people act in a hypocritical way. However, we feel that when you can change both of them and they come together voluntarily, without force or without pressure, then automatically, you are furthering brotherhood and bringing about better relationship between the two races.

RAZ: The entire speech lasted just under one hour.

BURNLEY: It began at about 8 p.m. And after the Q&A, it extended until about 10:30, but afterwards, Malcolm X actually went to the student lounge, and he invited any of the students who wanted to talk with him more to come and speak with him. And at that point, he conducted an interview with these white - young white students. He was willing to greet them more intimately and in private. And, obviously, he was seeking publicity, and he wanted to be as well known as possible. But, I don't know, it definitely is a gesture to make towards young white students who by all accounts he wouldn't really want to have anything to do with, but he was willing to greet them and talk to them in private.

RAZ: Malcolm Burnley did eventually write that narrative account of the incident for his class assignment. He's also writing a much longer version. Though Kati Marton says her husband, Richard Holbrooke, spoke often about the story, it's unclear whether he ever wrote it down. Holbrooke was planning to write his memoirs at the time of his death in December 2010. The journalist George Packer is working on a biography right now. And as for Brown University?

BURNLEY: In my research, there is no mention in the university calendar for that year or in President Keeney's notes of Malcolm X coming. It's essentially just been whitewashed from the university records.

RAZ: But as Malcolm Burnley reports, that's now about to change.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RAZ: And for Saturday, that's WEEKENDS on ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Guy Raz. Check out our weekly podcast, the Best of WEEKENDS on ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. You can find it at iTunes or npr.org/weekendatc. We post a new episode every Sunday night. For audio outtakes from interviews and so on from this program, you could follow me on Twitter @nprguyraz. We're back with a whole new hour of radio tomorrow. Until then, thanks for listening and have a great night.

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"We the people, in order to form a more perfect union."

Two hundred and twenty one years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787.

The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.

Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution - a Constitution that had at is very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.

And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part - through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk - to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.

This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign - to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together - unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction - towards a better future for of children and our grandchildren.

This belief comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people. But it also comes from my own American story.

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth

while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners - an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

It's a story that hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts - that out of many, we are truly one.

Throughout the first year of this campaign, against all predictions to the contrary, we saw how hungry the American people were for this message of unity. Despite the temptation to view my candidacy through a purely racial lens, we won commanding victories in states with some of the whitest populations in the country. In South Carolina, where the Confederate Flag still flies, we built a powerful coalition of African Americans and white Americans.

This is not to say that race has not been an issue in the campaign. At various stages in the campaign, some commentators have deemed me either "too black" or "not black enough." We saw racial tensions bubble to the surface during the week before the South Carolina primary. The press has scoured every exit poll for the latest evidence of racial polarization, not just in terms of white and black, but black and brown as well.

And yet, it has only been in the last couple of weeks that the discussion of race in this campaign has taken a particularly divisive turn.

On one end of the spectrum, we've heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it's based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap. On the other end, we've heard my former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation; that rightly offend white and black alike.

I have already condemned, in unequivocal terms, the statements of Reverend Wright that have caused such controversy. For some, nagging questions remain. Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial while I sat in church? Yes. Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely - just as I'm sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagreed.

But the remarks that have caused this recent firestorm weren't simply controversial. They weren't simply a religious leader's effort to speak out against perceived injustice. Instead, they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country - a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America; a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam.

As such, Reverend Wright's comments were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems - two wars, a terrorist threat, a falling economy, a chronic health care crisis and potentially devastating climate change; problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all.

Given my background, my politics, and my professed values and ideals, there will no doubt be those for whom my statements of condemnation are not enough. Why associate myself with Reverend Wright in the first place, they may ask? Why not join another church? And I confess that if all that I knew of Reverend Wright were the snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop on the television and You Tube, or if Trinity United Church of Christ conformed to the caricatures being peddled by some commentators, there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way

But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man. The man I met more than twenty years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another; to care for the sick and lift up the poor. He is a man who served his country as a U.S. Marine; who has studied and lectured at some of the finest universities and seminaries in the country, and who for over thirty years led a church that serves the community by doing God's work here on Earth - by housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing day care services and scholarships and prison ministries, and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS.

In my first book, Dreams From My Father, I described the experience of my first service at Trinity:

"People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend's voice up into the rafters....And in that single note - hope! - I heard something else; at the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories - of survival, and freedom, and hope - became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about...memories that all people might study and cherish - and with which we could start to rebuild."

That has been my experience at Trinity. Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety - the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger. Like other black churches, Trinity's services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor. They are full of dancing, clapping, screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear. The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.

And this helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Reverend Wright. As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children. Not once in my conversations with him have I heard him talk about any ethnic group in derogatory terms, or treat whites with whom he interacted with anything but courtesy and respect. He contains within him the contradictions - the good and the bad - of the community that he has served diligently for so many years.

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother - a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.

These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.

Some will see this as an attempt to justify or excuse comments that are simply inexcusable. I can assure you it is not. I suppose the politically safe thing would be to move on from this episode and just hope that it fades into the woodwork. We can dismiss Reverend Wright as a crank or a demagogue, just as some have dismissed Geraldine Ferraro, in the aftermath of her recent statements, as harboring some deep-seated racial bias.

But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. We would be making the same mistake that Reverend Wright made in his offending sermons about America - to simplify and stereotype and amplify the negative to the point that it distorts reality.

The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through - a part of our union that we have yet to perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American.

Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. As William Faulkner once wrote, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past." We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven't fixed them, fifty years after Brown v. Board of Education, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students.

Legalized discrimination - where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or fire departments - meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath

to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persists in so many of today's urban and rural communities.

A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family, contributed to the erosion of black families - a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened. And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods - parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pick-up and building code enforcement - all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us.

This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up. They came of age in the late fifties and early sixties, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted. What's remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but rather how many men and women overcame the odds; how many were able to make a way out of no way for those like me who would come after them.

But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it - those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations - those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future. Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table. At times, that anger is exploited by politicians, to gin up votes along racial lines, or to make up for a politician's own failings.

And occasionally it finds voice in the church on Sunday morning, in the pulpit and in the pews. The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning. That anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change. But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.

In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience - as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and

global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

Like the anger within the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in polite company. But they have helped shape the political landscape for at least a generation. Anger over welfare and affirmative action helped forge the Reagan Coalition. Politicians routinely exploited fears of crime for their own electoral ends. Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as mere political correctness or reverse racism.

Just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze - a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices, and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many. And yet, to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns - this too widens the racial divide, and blocks the path to understanding.

This is where we are right now. It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy - particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.

But I have asserted a firm conviction - a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people - that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice is we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances - for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs - to the larger aspirations of all Americans -- the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man whose been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for own lives - by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

Ironically, this quintessentially American - and yes, conservative - notion of self-help found frequent expression in Reverend Wright's sermons. But what my former pastor too often failed to understand is that embarking on a program of self-help also requires a belief that society can change.

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country - a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black; Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old -- is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know -- what we have seen - is that America can change. That is true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope - the audacity to hope - for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination - and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past - are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds - by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.

In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world's great religions demand - that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.

For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism. We can tackle race only as spectacle - as we did in the OJ trial - or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina - or as fodder for the nightly news. We can play Reverend Wright's sermons on every channel, every day and talk about them from now until the election, and make the only question in this campaign whether or not the American people think that I somehow believe or sympathize with his most offensive words. We can pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as evidence that she's playing the race card, or we can speculate on whether white men will all flock to John McCain in the general election regardless of his policies.

We can do that.

But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we'll be talking about some other distraction. And then another one. And then another one. And nothing will change.

That is one option. Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, "Not this time." This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can't learn; that those kids who don't look like us are somebody else's problem. The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21st century economy. Not this time.

This time we want to talk about how the lines in the Emergency Room are filled with whites and blacks and Hispanics who do not have health care; who don't have the power on their own to overcome the special interests in Washington, but who can take them on if we do it together.

This time we want to talk about the shuttered mills that once provided a decent life for men and women of every race, and the homes for sale that once belonged to Americans from every religion, every region, every walk of life. This time we want to talk about the fact that the real problem is not that someone who doesn't look like you might take your job; it's that the corporation you work for will ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit.

This time we want to talk about the men and women of every color and creed who serve together, and fight together, and bleed together under the same proud flag. We want to talk about how to bring them home from a war that never should've been authorized and never should've been waged, and we want to talk about how we'll show our patriotism by caring for them, and their families, and giving them the benefits they have earned.

I would not be running for President if I didn't believe with all my heart that this is what the vast majority of Americans want for this country. This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation - the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.

There is one story in particularly that I'd like to leave you with today - a story I told when I had the great honor of speaking on Dr. King's birthday at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist, in Atlanta.

There is a young, twenty-three year old white woman named Ashley Baia who organized for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. She had been working to organize a mostly African-American community since the beginning of this campaign, and one day she was at a roundtable discussion where everyone went around telling their story and why they were there.

And Ashley said that when she was nine years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom.

She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches. Because that was the cheapest way to eat.

She did this for a year until her mom got better, and she told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too.

Now Ashley might have made a different choice. Perhaps somebody told her along the way that the source of her mother's problems were blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work, or

Hispanics who were coming into the country illegally. But she didn't. She sought out allies in her fight against injustice.

Anyway, Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley."

"I'm here because of Ashley." By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children.

But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the two-hundred and twenty one years since a band of patriots signed that document in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins.

Obama and Race in America: What's Changed?

Gerald Early, Susan M. Glisson, Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Melvin Bray, Chris Rice

What opportunities and challenges of racial reconciliation present *themselves for the nation and the African American community in light of the election of Barack Obama as president? Does Obama's success point to a generational change in the style or substance of black politics? Does Obama's victory create a conversation on race or end an old one? What kind of conversation is needed? Five authors offer their reflections.*

Gerald Early:

Barack Obama's victory underscores the contradictory nature of American politics, for in voting for Obama, Americans have chosen to both reassert and abolish the idea of American exceptionalism. Electing a black man means that America remains a special country with a special destiny, for the moment, not just in its own eyes but in the eyes of the world—a country dedicated to the proposition that diversity is a form of divinity, an expression of God's providence, the path of our new errand in the wilderness of bigotry, an errand that started in earnest in 1954 with the desegregation of public schools—the errand of liberation and justice.

But this expression of American exceptionalism is a marked rejection of the old American mission of empire and power, the spreading of democratic values by money and might, by Emersonian ideals and corporate expansion, manifest destiny and unbridled nationalism.

It is difficult to read the change: Is it a sign of our faith in our institutions or of our fear

that they have failed? This difficulty is directly related to the political hieroglyphic that is Barack Obama. We elected change, but what sort of change? Hard-left change? Change to the so-called center because we were weary of Bush's right-wing change? Change to still more massive government which Americans now seem no longer to fear? (Give me European-style socialism or give me death! Our intellectuals have always loved that and are as tickled as their 19th-century counterparts that Europe, our betters, love us again.) Reformist change for competent, less corrupt government? Or just change to have a pretty face, a charming demeanor, coupled with an unusual name? (It was not just any black politician we wanted for the presidency, as no other could have achieved this feat, but only this particular one with his new story of immigration and hybridity.)

What made Obama attractive to wealthy and intellectual whites was that he was not freighted with the provincial story of black American injustice. He was international! He had lived abroad. And he has a high IQ—a throwback to the early-twentieth-century notion that the mixed-race black was superior to his purer brothers and sisters and made up most of the leadership cadre.

Bush dramatically proved that Anglo leadership is worn out: so we now opt for exoticized leadership around which, like children around a Maypole, we can project our fantasies of a renewed, multicultural America, confident that after all it isn't possible that Obama can be as bad as Bush, whatever he might be.

It has always been a tendency of liberals and the left since the end of 1960, to think that all American problems, all American political hypocrisy and cultural contradictions are subsumed by the race problem, are crucially embedded in it (African Americans have always thought this). To solve the race problem through some highly symbolic means such as electing a black president is tantamount to solving all of America's other problems: inequality, unregulated greed, poverty, a blundering and overbearing foreign policy, and all the rest. There must be some barrier-breaking that, when achieved, will undo all of our mistaken assumptions about ourselves forever.

Perhaps we have finally found The One, the one barrier breaker upon whom all the other barrier-breaking depends. In this election, the liberals and the left managed to convince the majority of the American voters that this is so. An extraordinary and profound accomplishment. We have changed as a result, but it is not the end of the race issue in America. Race is likely to become a more salient and bitter topic in the months and years ahead, now that we have a black president. But perhaps it *is* the end of the beginning that started not in 1619, but in 1865.

—Gerald Early, *essayist and professor of English and of African and African-American studies at Washington University in St. Louis*

Susan M. Glisson:
On the night of the presidential election, I watched the results come in with eight college students, four of them black and four white. As the news media projected key states for Obama, the excitement among my students was palpable. Screams, hugs, tears and spontaneous dancing erupted at the announcement of Obama's victory, as they did across the country.

Later we learned that, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the election of the first black president had triggered more than 200 hate-related incidents. Verbal altercations over the results clouded our campus and prompted rumors of physical assaults and arrests. The Associated Press and the SPLC reported on incidents of cross burning, racial epithets and racist graffiti.

These anecdotes encapsulate the range of possibilities and challenges that we now face in race relations. That I watched election results in a public accommodation with a multiracial group of youths in a state that just 40 years ago had outlawed such gatherings and prevented the participation of African Americans in the political process is certainly part of the progress that enabled Obama's ascension to the White House. The students reported how moved they were watching black Mississippians in their 80s and 90s voting, with tears in their eyes at the possibility a milestone might be achieved that they never thought they'd see. In an instant, at the projection of Obama's win, generations of thwarted hopes, diminished expectations and violent resistance to change were eased and perhaps healed.

Yet the backlash against Obama is a sobering reminder of the work that remains ahead. The displays of prejudice represent an opportunity. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has suggested that the greatest challenge in race relations is that most people do not believe there is a problem. I amend his remark to propose that the strongest obstacle to improved race relations is the lack of honest dialogue.

I cannot imagine a more promising climate than the one in which we now find ourselves. A deep measure of hope in our country's founding principles has been renewed among many who had despaired of progress. And those who would resist the universal application of those principles are removing the patina of politeness that has disguised their sustained prejudice and has undergirded systemic discrimination. We might now have an honest, intensely local grassroots dialogue about bias and structural racism and opportunity and inclusion in ways that have never been possible.

As president, Obama will face tremendous challenges, and he alone will not be able to solve them. But he tapped into the best strategies of the civil rights movement in his focus on grassroots, collective, participatory campaigning. Such local engagement is crucial to expanding the transformation of our country. Community building that grows from new relationships of trust across racial lines will mark the final fulfillment of a "more perfect union."

—Susan M. Glisson, *Executive Director of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi*

Curtiss Paul DeYoung:

In his book *The Luminous Darkness*, Howard Thurman wrote that "the burden of being black and the burden of being white is so heavy that it is rare in our society to experience oneself as a human being." On November 4 that burden was lifted for many African Americans and other persons of color. Even if the burden was lifted for only a few hours or a few days it was a welcome experience. Many whites went to the polls and cast a vote on the basis of the content of their candidate's character. They did not allow the color of his skin

to sway their decision. These whites also felt the burden lift, even if only for a short time.

Obama's election was a moment of reconciliation. After five centuries of racial injustice in America millions of people reclaimed a greater sense of their humanity. The question before us is: Can the moment become a season of reconciliation? And can a season cause a permanent shift toward a less racist and more reconciled society?

There have been moments in U.S. history when a national breakthrough for reconciliation seemed near. In 1968 the multiracial coalitions formed by the Poor People's Campaign of Martin Luther King Jr. and the political campaign of Robert F. Kennedy held great promise. But those coalitions did not cause a shift in the landscape of reconciliation.

Forty years later the United States is in the midst of a dramatic demographic shift. At the midpoint of the twenty-first century the U.S. will be a diverse and pluralistic nation with no racial majority. The population will be 46 percent white, 30 percent Latino, 15 percent black or African and 9 percent Asian, with the remainder Native Americans, multiracial people and others. Obama's election signals this new reality. The flexing of political muscle by Latinos in this election is another sign.

Racism is not over because one black person has been elected president. But because of Obama's election I have the audacity to hope for: children of color dreaming about the future with an imagination less restricted by racism; people discovering new spaces and new language for conversing about racism and reconciliation; youth growing up in diverse communities which lead to the erasure of racism as each subsequent generation becomes less racist and more reconciled; more whites welcoming an African-American pastor to oversee their intimate spiritual concerns because of the experience of a black president as their leader.

My son, a student at New York University, celebrated both his birthday and Obama's election in Times Square on November 4. Like Obama, my son has a parent who is white and a parent who is black. The election of Obama opens the door for multiracial people in our society to embrace the fullness of their identity without denying the reality of racism.

—Curtiss Paul DeYoung, professor of Reconciliation Studies at Bethel University in St. Paul and author of *Living Faith: How Faith Inspires Social Justice (Fortress)*.

Melvin Bray:

The defining question for an Obama-era America, pregnant with possibility, will be: What does it mean to be postracial? The term *postracial* has such potential for misinterpretation that Newark mayor Cory Booker disallowed it on MSNBC's election night coverage:

> I reject the idea of a postracial America. I want to luxuriate in the racial deliciousness of our country: the Italian-American, the Irish-Americans, the Mexican-Americans. I mean, that's what makes America great. We are a nation that celebrates racial diversity. We're not Norway; we're not South Korea; we are the United States of America. The story of America is one of bringing such differences together to manifest a united set of ideals—not a united culture, not a united language, not a united religion, but a united set of ideals. That was what made America

> dramatic when it was founded, the first country of its kind in humanity. So I reject that. I want to celebrate all of America: its richness, its diversity, its deliciousness.

I concur with Mayor Booker. "God forbid if we ever get to a point where we 'transcend our race.'"

I get the distinct impression that many people who talk about postracial society mean a society in which we are "over and done with race." As Robert Jensen reminds us in his book *The Heart of Whiteness*, "Race is a fiction we must never accept; race is a fact we must never forget." The election of a person of color to the highest office in the land did not change this one bit.

If it is to follow the pattern of other such "post" constructs, *postracial* most appropriately identifies those who have suffered through the crucible of race and come out the other side determined to live and trust beyond race—still in visceral awareness of its impact and in unequivocal opposition to even the slightest of its indignities.

Long before such "post" language came into vogue, Cornel West, one of the notable American postmodern thinkers, wrote about the dangers of making race the sum of identity. West advocates the replacement of "racial reasoning" with a "moral reasoning" that engages beyond the arguments of the past, that obliterates the categories of left-right-center and conservative-liberal. That seems to be descriptive of Obama's decentralized postracial cadre.

In order to be healing and generative, our future conversations must be rooted in the reciprocal admissions inherent in anything postracial—and must be rooted in two assumptions: 1) there are those who have been disadvantaged in our country historically, and consequently 2) there are those who have been historically advantaged in our country. Neither admission is debatable anymore, and we must recognize the existence of either condition as decidedly unfair and immoral. We must commit ourselves to rectifying both. We can't settle for just doing better from this point forward. "Equal rights" to a piece of pie means little when the entire pie was divided up before one was even allowed to sit down at the table.

If *postracial* is to denote an actual repudiation of the discriminatory use of race, it must also become the catch-all concept for the refutation of any act of civil discrimination—paralleling the way people of color sometimes use *racism* to denote any abuse of power for which there does not exist a specific term. Not everything is about race, but race has been a fitting proxy for intractable abuses of power. If our Obama-inspired postracial impulses don't demand from us unequivocal justice in all facets of democratic life—gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, national origin and so on—then we might as well throw the term out.

—Melvin Bray, *who teaches at Pine Forge Academy, a Seventh-day Adventist school in Pennsylvania. He is a participant in Emergent Church conversations, and he blogs at melvinbray.wordpress.com.*

Chris Rice:

Obama's presidency marks indisputable progress and the end of certain debates about race. Whether it was a matter of finally allowing character and excellence to trump skin

color, or a new generation which embraces multiethnicity, enough white people have changed to support a black man as their leader. I suspect that many American hearts and minds will be further changed by witnessing the Obama marriage and family, their most up-close introduction to a black family that will defy stereotypes reinforced by lack of interracial friendships.

And the debate has ended as to whether African Americans have gained significant power in America when the most powerful person in the world is Barack Obama.

Yet these new racial facts highlight all the more a strange paradox: progress toward assimilating into mainstream power is not the same as experiencing racial reconciliation and beloved community. Three challenges illuminate the difference.

First, if many whites have become less racist, and many blacks have gained power, together this "new mainstream" increasingly isolates itself from America's poor. What is true in my city of Durham seems true everywhere: 90 percent of gun murders occur in neglected communities of color, and people of all races and all churches are largely abandoning these communities. Furthermore, the new multiethnic mainstream does not seem disturbed by the new American segregation—we have the highest incarceration rate in the world and no social imagination about redeeming those in prison and the communities they come from. The force of exclusion is shifting from race to haves and have-nots, with profound results at the margins. An African-American pastor of an interracial church in inner-city Atlanta tells me that longtime neighborhood residents and the transplants (white, Asian-American, Latino, black) who have made the neighborhood their home for the sake of shalom and solidarity are creating a "new we" more powerful than ethnic identities.

A second challenge of racial reconciliation was revealed at a May gathering of U.S. peace and justice leaders at Duke Divinity School. The hottest issue that emerged was not black-white but immigration and the black-brown divide. One black pastor's honest admission—"My people don't view immigration raids as our issue"—opened a candid and fresh conversation that led to redefinitions about who "our people" are. Since May this pastor has helped ignite a new interracial, grassroots coalition addressing immigration issues in Houston.

These first two challenges both point to the unfinished business of the civil rights movement: moving from integration to *koinonia*. Sharing spaces of everyday interracial life and mission together in local places is the deeper, more beautiful and transformational vision whose absence continues to impoverish us. Nowhere is this absence seen more vividly than in the segregated Sabbath of a church which has accepted ecclesial racialization as inevitable, coming somehow to believe that we can experience God's new creation without experiencing one another's company as brothers and sisters. We still don't desire one another's company in the intimate mutuality of worshiping together weekly, reading the Bible and praying together, eating together, and ministering at the margins together as allies for the sake of the gospel.

In this respect, the hope I am holding onto for Obama's leadership is the depth and candor of his Philadelphia speech on race and the fact that his most fundamental racial identity seems to be his being biracial.

He represents a new generation of children of interracial families who have experienced the rich gifts and real challenges of finding intimacy across the divide, who refuse to choose between the cultures of their two parents. They want the best of both, see the flaws of self-sufficiency, and are willing to lose some friends along the way for the sake of their desire for something better than the old categories of who "my people" are.

To finally have a person like Obama as president, neither black nor white, may point us to what it looks like to embrace the harder, deeper work of mutuality and *koinonia* which is the church's unfinished business. Our communities and congregations need to look more like him.

—Chris Rice, *codirector of the Center for Reconciliation at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.*