

A Response to Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

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Formed in 2007, Christian Churches Together in the USA is a fellowship of 36 national communions including African American, Catholic, Evangelical, Historic Protestant, Pentecostal, and Orthodox and six national organizations including American Bible Society, Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat For Humanity, Sojourners, and World Vision. National leaders of the participant churches and organizations meet annually for mutual support, to foster Christian unity, to foster evangelism, and to speak to society with a common voice whenever possible.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ and all Americans,

As leaders of Christian Churches Together in the USA, we have been challenged anew by the letter Dr. King wrote fifty years ago to another group of religious leaders while sitting in jail. The “Letter from Birmingham Jail” was written as a response to an open letter to Dr. King that appeared in a local newspaper, from eight white clergymen of the state (including bishops, pastors and a rabbi). They urged an end to the demonstrations and civil disobedience that were occurring in the city and the use, instead, of patient negotiation and legal action to address any perceived denial of rights to Black citizens.

Rather than simply dismissing the concerns raised in the letter from the clergymen, or responding with anger, Dr. King addressed them as “Fellow Clergyman” and as “brothers.” *“Since I feel 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.”*¹ He addressed each of their statements, inferences and assumptions, and also laid out his own disappointments with and vision for the church as an agent of God's justice and peace. This “Letter from Birmingham Jail” was rapidly picked up by media around the world and was immediately recognized as a document of historic significance. It has stood since as a landmark in the literature of social justice, exhibiting the same spirit as that of the great prophet Micah: “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

¹ “Letter from Birmingham Jail”, Liberation Curriculum, Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project, p. 1. Page number references in the footnotes are to this source unless otherwise indicated.

Since the open letter which compelled Dr. King to respond came from religious leaders of Alabama in 1963, we as church leaders of the 21st century representing an array of religious traditions now feel compelled to respond to Dr. King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

We Are Grateful

We express profound gratitude to the leaders of the civil rights movement whose sacrifices have moved us closer to God's justice. Those leaders and thousands who followed their lead accomplished more than many could imagine, and demonstrated the power of Christian, nonviolent action. We celebrate the remarkable strides made through their courageous witness.

We Are Challenged

We are deeply moved by the key themes of Dr. King's letter and lift them up anew that they may again challenge our churches and our nation:

- **To realize our essential interdependence.**

"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."²

As American society becomes increasingly multicultural and globalized, our interdependence becomes both more evident and more complex. We are better able to trace how the fate of "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40) is linked to the choices made by the more

² P. 1

powerful and affluent. In a more diverse nation than in 1963, Black-White issues are now accompanied and complicated by the growing presence of many other ethnic and racial groups.

It is still true, though under-appreciated, that the destiny of African Americans is uniquely *"tied up with America's destiny."*³ Dr. King's expansive vision of inescapable mutuality and human equality would no doubt also embrace other *"abused and scorned"* groups, such as Native Americans, refugees and immigrant communities whose story is also being woven into the American *"garment of destiny"* through struggle. Following Dr. King's lead, we must settle for nothing less than true and total partnership, clear of *"the dark clouds of racial prejudice ... and the deep fog of misunderstanding."*

- **To address the causes of injustice, not just the symptoms.**

*"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."*⁴

The tendency to focus on symptoms rather than causes persists in our day. There is a danger of naively believing that the systemic causes of poverty among African Americans and other disadvantaged groups either never existed or have already been dealt with, and that current social problems may thus be attributed primarily to the choices of individuals. Without diminishing the importance of personal responsibility, we dare not negate or neglect the persistent systemic factors embedded in our laws, economic structures and popular culture that reinforce deep-seated racial disparities.

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⁴ P. 1

As Dr. King recognized, the debilitating reality of systemic injustice in a racialized society leads to *"pent up resentments and latent frustrations"*⁵ among African Americans, which too often find release in destructive (often *self-destructive*) ways. If we deal only with these surface expressions of pain, whether through the criminal justice system or through ministries of personal transformation alone, and fail to grapple with the underlying causes, we will never achieve the goals espoused by Dr. King.

- **To recognize that the struggle is not only economic and political, but personal.**

*"When you 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."*⁶

Dr. King's litany of wrongs endured by African Americans makes clear not only the legalized inequities of segregation but also its emotional and psychological impact. Segregation was the structural manifestation of an existential message: *You are inferior, you are nobody*. It is a mistake to think the civil rights movement was only about winning political and economic gains. At its heart it was about creating a community that honors the full equality of *all* people. While we rightly celebrate desegregation, the Civil Rights Act and other vital legal remedies, we must also acknowledge that a *"degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'"* persists in the experience of many African Americans. Millions are still *"smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society."*⁷ Millions are still cut off from hope for a future, *"plunged into the abyss*

⁵ P. 6

⁶ P. 3

⁷ P. 3

of despair."⁸ Children growing up surrounded by substandard schools, housing and neighborhoods still internalize a message of inferiority. The structures of our society must echo the truth that Dr. King called "*the birthright of every individual*": "*I am a person ... with dignity and honor.*"⁹

- **To seek a higher standard for public policy and political participation.**

"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. ... Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.'"¹⁰

Dr. King's letter offers us two specific criteria for any public policy: Is this a law that "*distorts the soul and damages the personality*"?¹¹ And was this law developed without the opportunity for full participation by those it affects? "*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.*"¹² We must therefore evaluate not only the specific content of our laws, but the ongoing barriers to equitable participation in our democracy. Unfortunately, in many ways these barriers seem to be self-reinforcing rather than eroding over time. Even under the watch of an African American president, African Americans and other disadvantaged groups have been at risk of being divested of their voice by powerful interest groups.

⁸ P. 3

⁹ "Where Do We Go from Here" (address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1967)

¹⁰ P. 3-4

¹¹ P. 4

¹² P. 4

- **To be extremists for love, justice and peace in Christ.**

"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?"¹³

Dr. King reminds us that though we may pursue the illusion of moderation, in reality we cannot avoid taking a stand. Mere "lukewarm acceptance"¹⁴ of the concerns of African Americans and other disadvantaged groups, which tacitly communicates that we have already made sufficient progress, presents a stumbling block to authentic change. As Dr. King recognized, the moderate "prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."¹⁵ In contrast, being a Christian necessitates forsaking the comfort and safety of our social order when it rests on less than God's intentions. *"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."¹⁶ This need is no less dire in our day.*

- **To act now.**

"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

¹³ P. 6

¹⁴ P. 4

¹⁵ P. 4; also see Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race*

¹⁶ P. 7

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."¹⁷

We must view ourselves as stewards of time, and time is to be used effectively to further the ends of God's kingdom. Inaction reinforces the status quo. We cannot rest on the efforts of previous generations, as if we had arrived at the end of their struggle. Rather, in awareness that *"people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will,"*¹⁸ we must press on in doing right. Injustice persists, though sometimes in different forms, and previous civil rights victories are continually in jeopardy. As *"co-workers with God"* (see 2 Corinthians 6:1-2), we must never fall silent. This continued vigilance is particularly vital on behalf of children of color, who continue to inherit disadvantage in almost every arena of life. For children, especially, the principle cited by Dr. King applies: "Justice too long delayed is justice denied."

- **To engage in nonviolent direct action as a strategy for social transformation.**

*"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. ... Nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek."*¹⁹

¹⁷ P. 5

¹⁸ P. 5

¹⁹ P. 9

Nonviolent direct action offers a middle ground between self-serving complacency and hatred born of despair. Inspired by Dr. King's example, we are challenged to explore the full potential of nonviolence in addressing injustice. Our calling is still to love those whom we see as our opponents. While the core strategy of nonviolence remains the same, the methods must be creatively adapted to confront new threats to peace and justice. Communications technology has created entirely new ways of destroying political enemies. The growing political influence of wealthy corporations and interest groups makes it even more difficult to advocate for the most vulnerable in our society. Rhetorical and actual violence of extremists is on the rise, much of it with racial overtones. These extremist and hate groups threaten to take the law into their own hands, flouting the authority of government. In contrast, Dr. King wrote that those who practice civil disobedience must maintain *"the highest respect for law,"* by their willingness to accept the penalty for breaking an unjust law.²⁰ In confronting these new threats, the way of nonviolence calls us to first purify ourselves so that we do not simply emulate those we seek to resist.

- **To challenge injustice by bringing it into the 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."*²¹

Dr. King's letter calls the church to work for change by bringing social tensions to the surface, and then channeling the resulting discontent *"into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action."*²² We must promote research and reporting on racial issues, expose hidden

²⁰ P. 4

²¹ P. 5

²² P. 6

injustices, and provide opportunities for those without a voice to share their stories. In our media-saturated, controversy-hungry society, we must work to differentiate between empty sensationalism and constructive tension. We must not expose painful truths merely in order to attract media attention but to generate opportunities for meaningful, healing action. We also must not be afraid to risk new tensions in race relations by challenging the reigning belief that we live in a post-racial society. Candid conversations about race often expose suppressed racial hostility, but should not be condemned as the cause. We must encourage dialogue that dispels misunderstanding and prejudice, while confronting rhetoric that perpetuates *"the bondage of myths and half truths."*²³

- **To cherish the church, while holding it to a higher standard.**

*"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. ... Small in number, they were big in commitment."*²⁴

Like Dr. King, we balance a deep love for the church and belief in its potential with a critique of its failings. In recent decades, growing segments of the American church have been awakening to their responsibility "to do justice and to love kindness" (Micah 6:8), and to reject an un-biblical distinction between the gospel and social concerns. A movement of Christians from all denominations yearns to recapture a faith that transforms both themselves and the

²³ P. 2

²⁴ P. 8

world. Yet on issues of race, poverty and equality, too many churches still offer *"silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are."*²⁵ Representing the inverse of the early church, too many churches today are big on numbers and shallow in commitment.

- **To hold fast to the true foundation for the American dream.**

"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 Judeo-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."²⁶

Dr. King affirmed, *"I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham... because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands."²⁷* In our era, fear dominates the political ethos; threats from terrorism, the recession, deficit crisis, and natural disasters have tarnished confidence in the American dream. Dr. King's words remind us that our hope is not rooted in our economy or our military might, but in the best ideals of our nation as they reflect the moral laws of God. Then, as today, those who call attention to racialized injustices and question the status quo may be accused of being unpatriotic. We must insist that the current movement to revive patriotism and restore the Constitution remains grounded in American ideals that capture fundamental biblical principles: "All persons are created equal"; "liberty and justice for all"; "give me your struggling masses

²⁵ p. 8

²⁶ p. 9

²⁷ p. 9

yearning to breathe free.” Like Dr. King, we aim not to undermine our constitutional democracy but to fulfill its promise.

We Reflect

We review these key themes of Dr. King’s letter in a complex era. On the one hand blatantly racist laws have disappeared; explicitly racist attitudes and incidents of violence are less frequent; and opportunities for African Americans in business, education and public life are vastly greater than when Dr. King penned his famous letter a half century ago. On the other hand, year after year the unemployment rate for African Americans remains double that for white Americans; the poverty rate among African Americans is more than twice that of white Americans, and one in three African American children is growing up in poverty; half of all African American students (but less than 20% of whites) attend urban schools that are typically greatly inferior to (largely white) suburban schools; African Americans are disproportionately arrested and convicted, and face harsher sentences compared to white Americans in the criminal justice system. Segregation is no longer the law, but a form of it is experienced as a fact of life for many Americans, as we reside, are educated, work, and worship in largely homogenous settings. While African Americans seldom now face the open expressions of vicious racism endured by Dr. King's generation, they feel the downward tug of persistent undercurrents of racial prejudice and misunderstanding.

We recognize that racism, though a continuing reality, does not present a simple explanation for all these inequalities. The causes are complex and multiple. But we also acknowledge our temptation to discuss complexities rather than to demand and work toward change.

Another important dynamic of the bridge between Dr. King's time and ours is that there are many more people of color in public and private leadership roles across American society. The methods of the civil rights movement thus need to be adapted to the gains that it achieved. Efforts toward systemic change now require these non-Anglo "insiders" to advocate from within their organizations, rather than speaking only from the outside as was necessary in Dr. King's day. Leaders must develop connections and collaborative partners to drive reform, without losing their solidarity with those who remain on the margins.

In the face of the ongoing imperative of justice alongside the continuing presence of social conditions that "*distort[] the soul and damage[] the personality*,"²⁸ as well as the new doors of opportunities that stand open to advocates of change, we are led to both *confession* and *resolve*.

We Confess

As leaders of churches claimed by more than a hundred million Americans; as Catholics, Evangelicals and Pentecostals, Orthodox, and Protestants and as members of Historic Black denominations; as people of many races and cultures; we call ourselves, our institutions, and our members to repentance.

As church leaders, we confess we have tended to emphasize our responsibility to obey the law while neglecting our equal moral obligation to change laws that are unjust in their substance or application. All too often, the political involvement of Christians has been guided by the pursuit of personal or group advantage rather than a biblically grounded moral compass.

²⁸ p. 4

We confess it is too easy for those of us who are privileged to counsel others simply to “wait” — or to pass judgment that they deserve no better than what they already have.

We confess that we are slow to listen and give legitimacy to those whose experience of race relations and social privilege in America is different than our own. We keep the "other" at arm's length to avoid hearing the call to sacrifice on their behalf. Our reluctance to embrace our *"inescapable network of mutuality"* underscores Dr. King's observation that privileged groups seldom give up their advantages voluntarily. For example, it is difficult to persuade most suburban Christians to demand that they strive for the same quality of education in our cities that they take for granted in their own schools. To the extent that we do not listen in love, our influence in society is limited to *"a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound."*²⁹

We confess that we often prefer stability to upheaval, even when upheaval is the necessary pre-condition for the establishment of justice. We confess that we often avoid the fiscal, emotional and spiritual costs of changing our beloved institutions even when called to do so by our Lord and Savior. Our churches and denominational structures thus fail in critical ways to model the *"creative psalm of brotherhood"* invoked by Dr. King.³⁰ Recent efforts in the Christian community toward "racial reconciliation," though laudable in intent, tend to stop short of Dr. King's vision of true justice and fellowship. Sunday morning remains the most segregated time in our nation.

Those of us who lead predominantly white churches confess to our CCT colleagues of other ethnicities that we would prefer to overlook the ways in which we have replayed the role

²⁹ P. 8

³⁰ P. 5

of the “*white moderates*” who most disappointed Dr. King.³¹ We may support the idea of racial and economic justice, even preach on it or issue declarations. But too many of us are unwilling to put our lives behind our words. Dr. King's letter beckons us to follow the path of Amos, Paul and others throughout church history who chose to be “*extremist[s] for justice.*”³²

Because the history and experience of the different families in Christian Churches Together are different, each family feels compelled to confess in its own voice.

As the evangelical/Pentecostal family of Christian Churches Together, we confess with sadness and shame that we were at best silent and often even hostile when Dr. King led the historic movement against racial injustice. We also confess that it has taken us far too long, in the intervening years, to acknowledge pervasive racism in our midst and begin to repent and change. Even now our people often fail to grasp the complex realities of structural racism.

As the Catholic family of Christian Churches Together, we confess that the sin of racism breaches our relationships with one another and with God. We acknowledge that denying and minimizing institutional racism and race prejudice in various sectors of our society deeply damages the life and dignity of the children of God. Likewise, we lament the existence of racism within the Church which hinders mature faith formation, development of ecclesial leadership and full participation in parish life to the detriment of individuals, the church and society.

Concurrently, the Church unceasingly pursues justice and greater harmony within the human family. Through the Guidance of the Holy Spirit she continues to press toward “the beloved community” of which Dr. King spoke with passion and eloquence. Thus today, despite

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³² p. 6

complex new socio-economic and ethical challenges, indeed new forms of racism, we reaffirm the moral vision articulated in the U.S. Catholic Bishops' 1979 pastoral letter on racism, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*³³:

"The new forms of racism must be brought face-to-face with the figure of Christ. It is Christ's word that is the judgment on this world; it is Christ's cross that is the measure of our response; and it is Christ's face that is the composite of all persons but in a most significant way of today's poor, today's marginal people, today's minorities."

With Dr. King, we lament: "[We] 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."³⁴ His warning from a half-century ago has not lost its urgency: "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."³⁵ Then as now, young people in particular are critical of churches that fail to live out their teachings in the here and now. Today's youth tend to reject "the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows"³⁶ in favor of a more courageous, authentic faith. Just as America's destiny is tied up with the story of African Americans, the future of the church in America is intertwined with our response to injustice.

We Thank

³³ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day* (Washington, DC: USCC Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, 1979), P. 6

³⁴ P. 8

³⁵ P. 8

³⁶ P. 7

We also join Dr. King in thankfulness for "*noble souls from the ranks of organized religion [who] have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity,*"³⁷ stepping forward from every denomination and ethnicity to lay down their life for the good of their neighbors. Some of our churches have made justice a keystone of their life, ministry and mission. Many of our denominations have staff dedicated to undoing racism and fostering multicultural ministry. We yearn for this commitment to become ever more deeply rooted and widespread.

We Resolve

We proclaim that, while our context today is different, the call is the same as in 1963 — for followers of Christ to stand together, to work together, and to struggle together for justice. Inspired by Dr. King, we resolve courageously to face the injustice that is within ourselves, our institutions, and our nation. The church must lead rather than follow in the march toward justice. We also claim the strong biblical tradition that rejects selfish individualism. Biblical faith teaches that we are made for community; that we are our brother's and sisters' keepers; that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Biblical faith demands that Christians place the common good above individual privilege. As Dr. King insisted, this biblical summons to justice for all is also rooted deeply in the best of our American ideals, however imperfectly our nation has lived them.

In response to this high calling on the church to join God's work of redemption and reconciliation, we resolve to work together to expose, confront and transform the devastating legacy of systemic racism as it manifests itself in education, criminal justice, employment, housing, child welfare, and other practical arenas.

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- This includes reform of an educational system that perpetuates the injustice of abysmally inadequate urban, largely minority schools alongside excellent, majority-white suburban schools.
- This includes reform of a judicial system that intersects with one quarter of all African American men, with a devastating impact on families and communities.

We will risk being called extremists to refuse to postpone for another generation or three the just reality of quality education for all our children. We will risk creative tension to show our people that biblical justice demands prompt vigorous change. We dare not postpone action to a more convenient time when government budgets are flush and all complexities are resolved. We call on our members as well as our government to demand justice in our courts and schools in this generation, and end the scandal of ongoing racial discrimination. We resolve to be "*not merely a thermometer that record[s] the ideas and principles of popular opinion*" but "*a thermostat that transform[s] the mores of society.*"³⁸

Looking inward, we also resolve to work diligently toward the goal of becoming a church that is anti-racist.

- This requires *self-examination*. We resolve that CCT and each of its member churches will seek to discover and intentionally reflect upon their own histories of implicit and complicit participation in racial and ethnic injustice.
- This requires *communicating*. We resolve that CCT and each of its member churches and organizations will participate in intentional dialogue about the sin of racism and the pervasive effects of systemic racism within the church and the larger society.

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- This requires *action*. We resolve that all CCT member churches be encouraged to adopt anti-racism mandates, including policies that include anti-racism education and programs for local church members, staff, and volunteers.
- This requires *equipping*. We resolve to educate church leaders and local church members on ways to speak truth to power, organize their communities for nonviolent resistance, and participate effectively in legislative advocacy against manifestations of systemic racism.
- This requires *collaboration*. We resolve to connect diverse denominations in working together to dismantle racism in church and in society, partnering and sharing resources and costs associated with doing anti-racism work.
- This requires *relationship*. We resolve to cultivate opportunities, through CCT and in our local communities, to develop authentic relationships with people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. By humble listening and honest sharing, we will develop the empathy that gives energy to action.
- All of this requires *God working among us*. We resolve that, in our worship, we will celebrate our unity in Christ. We will confess, both corporately and individually, the race-based exclusion, oppression, and sin we have perpetuated. We resolve to allow worship to form us in such a way that we might bear the fruits of deep repentance – for some, recognizing our participation in racism, for others speaking truthfully and forgiving boldly, and for all seeking justice and right relationships with our brothers and sisters.

Inspired and ennobled by Dr. King's vision, may the fruit of our Christian unity be justice. And may the fruit of justice be to draw all people to know and glorify the God of justice.