

## **Imagining a World without Guns: Lessons in Nonviolent Peacemaking from the American Civil Rights Story**

Charles Marsh  
Professor of Religious Studies, University of Virginia

### **Introduction**

I am very grateful to Professor Daniel Capper for his kind words and his invitation to deliver the Fairchild Lectures at the University of Southern Mississippi. Until today, I had not seen Dan since the mid-eighties, when we were both students at the University of Virginia. I remember two things about him—in addition, of course to his dazzling brilliance in the classroom. Dan never wore shoes, even in winter on the coldest days of the year, and he always wore a Baltimore Orioles cap. It left an impression on me. It's very nice seeing you again, Dan, and I'm pleased that you have ended up near my old stomping ground.

I grew up in south central Mississippi. I lived in Laurel from 1967 to 1973, and many times came here to Hattiesburg with the Jones Junior High Fighting Yellow Jackets for football and basketball games. My uncle, Leonard Lowry, was editor of the *Hattiesburg American*, and I have fond memories of long summer evenings and wonderful meals at their home on Euclid Avenue with other family members from Jackson and New Orleans. So thank you for bringing me back to this place.

As Professor Capper mentioned, I was trained in philosophical theology and modern Christian thought. In 1992, I completed a book on the German theologian and resistance activist, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed in a concentration camp in 1945 for his involvement in the resistance movement against Hitler. Some of you have read him, most likely his books, *The Cost of Discipleship*, *Life Together*, and *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Bonhoeffer was one of the few Christians in Germany able to discern the evil of National Socialism and the idolatrous construction of the state and Fuhrer.

Then around 1993, while teaching at a Jesuit college in Baltimore, four years out of graduate school, my thoughts and dreams, and increasingly my journals and notebooks, became filled with memories of my childhood in the deep South. I had not thought too much of these years in college or graduate school, but now I could think of nothing else. As the personal memories burst into consciousness like floodwaters, I began to see in this rich lived experience theological questions as profound and perplexing as any I had previously considered. The beliefs and actions of ordinary people—of saints and villains, cowards and heroes—illuminated in my mind a new way of thinking about the story.

The Laurel I grew up in, as many of you know, had by 1967 established the well-deserved reputation as the epicenter of southern terrorism, home to the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and their daily installments of misery

and violence. My father was the young preacher at First Baptist Church, cheerfully indifferent to the racial turmoil he was moving through (surrounding him would work as well). The Civil Rights Movement, which I observed from various stages of pubescent awkwardness, became our trial by fire.

Out of these reminiscences emerged a book called *God's Long Summer*, about the uses and misuses of religion during this intensely violent period of the Civil Rights Movement. I wanted to understand how Christian beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, and the world shaped differing ways of thinking about race, social order, and human community. I wanted to know why, for example, white southern evangelicals, of the sort who raised me in the faith, remained indifferent if not contemptuous toward the suffering of African Americans under Jim Crow and why some white Christians believed that God had called them to a life of holy terrorism.

### **Christianity and American Violence**

Several weeks ago in anticipation of this talk—when I still planned to talk in detail about specific issues of gun control in the United States—I walked into my local Barnes & Noble and purchased some publications on handguns and assault weapons. What first struck me about the two magazines I purchased—not your hunting and outdoorsmen magazines to be sure, but magazines devoted to weapons of destruction—was that they

exuded the same kind of predatory male aggressiveness that one associates with hard-core pornography. The world that unfolds in these pages is that of angry embittered white men, stalking an invisible object of fear, with the intention of destroying it in a flurry of gunfire. The number of children featured in ads is alarming but not surprising. The gun industry desperately needs new customers—the male market is fairly saturated—and children and teenagers, enamored of the exciting possibility of destroying human life through the simulated murders stations at their local video arcade, must seem like a plausible new market. The pornographic quality appears too in the various ads featuring scantily clad women caressing guns like toys. In one ad for a gun shop in Oklahoma, a little blond-haired girl no older than my four-year-old daughter smiles for the camera in front of a wall filled with machine guns. She is holding a machine gun. She is wearing a bathing suit.

My parents have lived in Europe on and off for the past ten years. Both my mother and father hail from the state of Mississippi; both grew up in Jackson. My father is a Southern Baptist Minister and my mother was former Miss Central High School—hardly the backgrounds of social radicals. The two questions they are most often asked by European Christians, with whom they partner in church planting and missions, is why the United States has 41 million adults working without health insurance and why we carry guns in larger numbers than any other country in the world.

Here is my father's response to the latter; the reflections of a conservative tea-totting Southern Baptist minister who voted for George W. Bush in 2000: "The tragedy of the gun control issue, to me, is a manifestation of the tragedy of today's brand of USA Christianity: the refusal to acknowledge that following Jesus places the disciple in contradiction with culture... Church people are getting their signals from political ideology, NRA lobbyists, and traditions-culture. Sadly, inflamed remarks and presuppositions seem to rule the day. I would be labeled liberal by many Christians because I believe very passionately that guns should be controlled, though I would prefer that they be outlawed completely.

"What is the church's role? Teach the people to take seriously the teachings of Jesus, and focus on His teachings which oppose violence!" I am so embarrassed that the Southern Baptist Convention was the only major Christian denomination to advocate for the Iraq War. We need to take seriously the teachings of Jesus, and when He talked about refusing to be people of violence, that is what He meant. If I want what is best for my fellow beings, if I really desire to see a society of order, security, and freedom, then I should have no problem in seeing the connection between GUNS FOR ALL and the prevailing tragedies of wars that follow. The prophets had a vision of the kingdom where swords would be beaten into plows. I hope and I pray that we in the church will capture that vision: a kingdom where violence would be unthinkable.

In other words, beware of a nation saturated in guns, seeking new markets for violence. Beware of a nation in which 30,000 of its own citizens are killed each year by gunfire—of which only about 250 are instances of self-defense. (Guns are the only manufactured consumer product exempt from our nation’s laws on health, safety, and consumer protection—this means that the health and safety rules for toy guns are actually stronger than those for real guns.)

### **Dr. King’s Journey to Nonviolence**

In the minutes we have together tonight, I want us to follow the path of thought and meaning opened up in Dr. King’s understanding of that “new world”, which we might call the new world of God. King and so many others in the Movement saw a new world beyond the clanking machinery of militarism, beyond the iron hard rule of Jim Crow, beyond the dehumanizing poverty. I want us to revisit the Civil Rights Movement, its spiritual energies and convictions, as a way of reminding ourselves what kind of world was glimpsed beyond the old ordeal of “poverty, racism and militarism”—and perhaps in this manner to explore expressions of authentic faith.

As a Christian theologian, I also want us to hear their words, to see their actions, and to celebrate their sacrifices as a bold—indeed an audacious—retrieval of the Christian tradition’s distinctive social practices of

forgiveness and reconciliation; and by retrieving these peculiar practices and these ways of speaking, by reclaiming these energies, convictions and passions, I hope as well to salvage the integrity of the Christian faith from its contemporary misuse by theocratic leaders, who with their fawning theatrical piety, remain terrifyingly convinced of their divine destiny to shape the world in their own image.

So I want us to ponder and imagine together tonight the possibility of a world without guns. I want us to do this by pondering the new social world imagined by the Civil Rights Movement in the South, by pondering the strange, new world glimpsed by these brothers and sisters most of whom cleaved to the prophetic witness of the Black Freedom Church; that new world that often went by the name of the beloved community.

### **The Montgomery Bus Boycott**

In the final days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, in December, 1956, with the Supreme Court decision of November guaranteeing the African American protesters a victory over the segregated city laws, the Montgomery Improvement Association held a week-long Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change at the Holt Street Baptist Church. Martin Luther King's address, entitled "Facing the Challenge of a New Age" King told the Holt Street congregation:

But we remember as we boycott that a boycott is not an end within itself... [The] end is reconciliation, the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community... It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.

“Not through violence; not through hate; no not even through boycotts; but through love.”<sup>1</sup>

What a beautiful notion this is: the beloved community. One of King’s young associates, the former Chairman of SNCC and current U.S. Congressman from Georgia, John Lewis described the beloved community as “nothing less than the Christian concept of the Kingdom of God on earth.” The first time he heard the phrase, Lewis said, it evoked for him a lush and embracing vision of renewed community and gave voice to all that he was working for as a young civil rights activist devoted to the task of applying the teachings of Jesus directly to social existence in the South.

The pursuit of beloved community gave to the Civil Rights Movement a unifying spiritual vision, which had the resilience to hold many disparate agendas together.

Although such organizations as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Conference on Racial Equality (CORE) are often been described as the secularizing wave of the movement, a decisive theological self-understanding is seen in in SNCC’s earliest founding



documents. In the staff meeting of April 29, 1962, members of the organization had resolved their firm commitment to the creation of “a social order permeated by love and to the spirituality of nonviolence as it grows from the Judeo-Christian tradition.”<sup>2</sup> To be sure, there were plenty of SNCC activists whose moral energies were sustained by other religious sources other than Christian or by humanistic ideals. SNCC brought to the Civil Rights Movement youthful energy and a bold, restless vision of social change, more impatient and edgy than King’s, but still shaped by the Biblical narrative and the story of the new kingdom of peace inaugurated by Jesus Christ. Love was “the central motif of nonviolence,” the “force by which God binds man to himself and man to man”, that goes to the “extremes” in radical acts of compassion and forgiveness—“even in the midst of hostility.” “Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt,” read the statement, “[the] redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.”<sup>3</sup> In the 1962 document, staff members further resolved their firm commitment to the creation of “a social order permeated by love and to the spirituality of nonviolence as it grows from the Judeo-Christian tradition.” Such love as this would forge new social spaces and habitations, create an “atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities”.

In Montgomery, Dr. King is not sanguine on the achievement of the beloved community; he does not for a second think that the “new order” has

arrived in full or is about to anytime soon. Still, King sees the Montgomery protests—which he calls a “spiritual struggle” and a “Christian movement”—as a historical event through which “a new social order is being born.” God is “working in history to bring about this new age,” and so “we stand today between two worlds—the dying old and the emerging new.”<sup>4</sup> The new order might take global form in its fullest expression but its point of access is particular, local and spiritual. The revolution begins around the mimeograph machine, in a whole of lot of waiting around for car rides and for seats in churches, in tedious organizational meetings and arguments.

You may be surprised to learn that when Dr. King arrived in Montgomery in the fall of 1954, the last thing on his mind was turning the other cheek; in fact the last thing on his mind was Civil Rights activism. He came to Montgomery in search of denominational fame and fortune. Dexter Avenue Baptist Church had no interest in racial crusading. Church members shared a common hope of a future without Jim Crow, but they were not going to ignite the fires of dissent. Dexter had long prided itself on its political power and access to white elites.

Add to that the fact that the deacons of the church had just let go of the tempestuous Vernon Johns, the brilliant and dramatically confrontational pastor who preceded King at Dexter Avenue. Johns was a true scholar, a summa cum laude graduate in classics of Oberlin College, second fiddle to no man intellectually. And perhaps because of his

intellectual self-confidence, he made it his business to constantly provoke the Dexter membership. “If you ever see a good fight, get into it” was Johns’ motto, learned from his mother.<sup>5</sup> Johns pushed the congregation hard—as well as the white bigots who dared to cross his path—to a breaking point. Folks at Dexter should get over their social privilege and get their hands dirty.

Martin Luther King, Jr., on the other hand, had to be talked into accepting the leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) by Ralph Abernathy when the organization was formed the day after Rosa Parks refused to move from her seat in the front of the bus. And King accepted only after being reassured, or perhaps cajoled into thinking, that the boycott would over in a day. In his first list of demands as president of the MIA, King made clear that the protest was not about challenging segregation. Did you get that? Not about challenging segregation. The NAACP refused to endorse King’s list.

King was no pacifist either. Glenn Smiley, a white staff member visiting Montgomery with the Quaker Fellowship of Reconciliation claimed to have discovered “an arsenal” in the parsonage.<sup>6</sup> “When I was in graduate school,” King later remarked, “I thought the only way we could solve our problem... was an armed revolt.”<sup>7</sup> Now that may have been an exaggeration, since we have no written or remembered evidence that King ever held

militant views about violent insurrection. In fact, his student years are marked by a host of decidedly non-confrontational commitments.

But King changed. And the Montgomery boycott became his education in lived theology, burning away the moral equivocations of the lecture hall and the bourgeois aspirations to personal comfort. By the end of January of the year 1956, King was telling reporters that his decision against calling segregation itself into question had been a mistake and needed to be reversed. “Frankly, I am for immediate integration,” he said. “Segregation is evil, and I cannot, as a minister, condone evil.”<sup>8</sup> [Niebuhr] What happened?

The boycott appeared to be floundering. White city leaders had been working hard to crack the movement’s precarious solidarity. King fell into despair and considered himself a failure. In a gloomy meeting on January 23, 1956, he offered his resignation as MIA president. It was not accepted, but his doubts about his own leadership were not removed.

After his first arrest and jailing a week later, King returned late to his parsonage. He was exhausted by the previous night in jail and the long day of planning and negotiations with MIA officials that had followed. King wanted nothing but to collapse next to his wife Coretta and fall asleep to the gentle sound of his six-week-old daughter’s breathing in her crib. But then the phone rang, and on the other end of the line rushed a torrent of obscene words, and then the death threat: “Listen, nigger, we’ve taken all we want from you; before next week you’ll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.”<sup>9</sup>

King hung up without comment, as had become his custom, but all hopes of much-needed rest were gone. Threatening phone calls had become a daily routine throughout the weeks of the protests. In recent days, however, the phone calls had started to take a toll, increasing in number to thirty or forty a day and more menacing in their intent.<sup>10</sup>

Unwelcome thoughts prey on the mind in the late hours, and the caller's vulgar words and voice intruded into the silent parsonage. King felt himself overcome with fear. "I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. I had heard these things before, but for some reason that night it got to me."<sup>11</sup> King rose from his bed and walked down the hall to the kitchen. He made a pot of coffee and sat down at the table. "I felt myself faltering," he said.<sup>12</sup> "I was ready to give up."<sup>13</sup> It was as though the strong and violent undercurrents of the protest rushed in upon him with a heightened immediacy, and he surveyed the turbulent waters for a way of escape, searching for an exit point between courage and convenience, "a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward".<sup>14</sup> And he found none.

For the first time, he grasped the utter seriousness of his situation, and with it the inescapable fact that his family could be taken away from him any minute, or more likely he from them.<sup>15</sup> He felt himself reeling within, his soul "melted because of trouble, at wit's end", as the Psalmist said. "I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak."

As King sat at his kitchen table, sipping his coffee, his dark ruminations were interrupted by a sudden notion that at once heightened his desperation and clarified his options. “Something said to me, ‘You can’t call on Daddy now, you can’t call on Mama. You’ve got to call on that something in that person that your daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.’”<sup>16</sup> With his head now buried in his hands, King bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.

“Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. I still think I’m right. I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak now, I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage. Now, I am afraid. And I can’t let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

As his prayer enveloped the silent room and house, King heard a voice saying, “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you. Even until the end of the world.”<sup>17</sup> And then King heard the voice of Jesus. He heard the voice of Jesus saying, “Fight on.” King recalled, “He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.” And as the divine voice washed

over the stains of the wretched caller, King reached the spiritual shore beyond fear and apprehension. “I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before,” he said. “Almost at once my fears began to go,” he said of that midnight flash of illumination and resolve. “My uncertainly disappeared. I was ready to face anything.”<sup>18</sup>

Three nights after the kitchen vision on January 30, 1956, King stood at the pulpit of First Baptist Church, addressing a standing-room only audience, when word reached him that the parsonage had been bombed. King’s remarks that afternoon at First Baptist had been intended as responses to two countervailing developments: the city’s new “get-tough” policy and the simmering discontent among a growing number of black Montgomerians with the MIA negotiators. King knew that certain voices in the black community started criticizing the protest organizers’ boycott and the Montgomery movement’s commitment to “the Christian Way”, which the MIA described in paid advertisement in the newspaper as the “only way of reaching a satisfactory solution to the problem.”

In his First Baptist sermon King was hoping to invigorate the movement’s unity. He appealed to the idea of the beloved community, though not yet by name. He offered a simple, eloquent rendering of the church’s collective soul. “We are a chain,” he said. “We are linked together, and I cannot be what I ought to unless you are what you ought to be.”<sup>19</sup> King’s words echoed Jesus’ sunset meditation in the Garden of Gethsemane, spoken

on the eve of the crucifixion, his prayer that the world might see the oneness of their love. "I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one." The movement community, King reminded the audience, is linked with a greater force than moral resolve, strategic goals or sentiment; indeed the movement is an echo, a distant but truthful repetition, of the love of the non-violent God.

King received the news of the parsonage bombing like a man inwardly prepared for battle, sober and indefatigable, surprising many in the congregation. "My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it," he said.<sup>20</sup>

By the time he arrived home five, a large crowd had already begun forming in the street and front yard. Memories of the size of crowd vary greatly; some say hundreds, others thousands. But everyone recalls the anger and insult incited by police officers who pushed and threatened bystanders in an effort to clear the streets. As King made his way through the crowd to the house, he overheard one man saying, "I ain't gonna move nowhere. That's the trouble now; you white folks is always pushin' us around. Now you got your .38 and I got mine; so let's battle it out."<sup>21</sup>

King felt the undercurrents of rage that had run strong for years in the black community swelling into the immediate threat of violence. Many in the crowd were armed and ready to fire. King felt the mobilization of sentiment away from peaceful negotiation to militant conflict. The weeks of successful



non-violent protest seemed on the verge of turning suddenly violent. He knew that there was growing resentment, too, of his own admonitions to Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. The movement was about to turn violent.

Inside the house, with the front window shattered and a hole blasted into the porch, King was relieved to find Coretta and Yoki safe and in good spirits. Mayor Gayle, along with police commissioner Sellers, the fire chief, and newspaper reporters, had assembled in the dining room and proceeded to make official declarations of regret. Meanwhile, the crowd outside, still collecting newcomers from all corners of the block, continued to press forward against the police barricade. King realized he had to address the people, and he walked onto the porch and called for order. His words, reminding his fellow travelers of their basic spiritual obligations, formed an arch from the First Baptist Church meeting to the gathering of this church militant, now shuffling around outside the house at 309 South Jackson Street, and the words extended the Gospel from to sanctuary to the parsonage and wrapped the whole expanse of the violent Montgomery night in a sheltering story of peace.

“Now let’s not become panicky,” King told the crowd from the damaged front porch after offering reassurances that Coretta and Yoki were unharmed. “If you have weapons, take them home; if you do not have them, please do not seek to get them. We cannot solve this problem through

retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with nonviolence. Remember the words of Jesus: 'He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.' Remember that is what God said."<sup>22</sup>

A "respectful hush" settled over the crowd, as Jo Ann Robinson recalled. Even the police grew still and listened to King's words.<sup>23</sup>

"We must love our white brothers," King continued, "no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them. Jesus still cries out in words that echo across the centuries: 'Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that spitefully use you.' This is what must live by. We must meet hate with love.

"Remember, if I am stopped, this movement will not stop, because God is with the movement. Go home with this glowing faith and this radiant assurance. Go home and sleep calm. Go home and don't worry. Be calm as I and my family are. We are not hurt and remember that if anything happens to me, there will be others to take my place."

Throughout the Jackson Street crowd, a scattering of "Amen's" and "God bless you's" and "We are with you all the way, Reverend's", created a new momentum; the threatening Jackson Street crowd became the worshipping congregation. King looked out over the audience and saw tears rolling down the faces of many people. Some hummed church songs.

Police Commissioner Sellers then took the porch and once again stated his regrets and good intentions. When some "bless you's" and "Amen's"

slurred into “boos” and hisses, King finally interrupted Sellers and held up his hand for silence. “Remember what I just said. Let us hear the commissioner”. King knew all too well that this gathering could have turned into the “darkest night in Montgomery’s history”, with hundreds—some said thousands—of enraged Negroes surrounding the middle-aged mayor and his three sidekicks. But “something happened” to avert the disaster, King said. “The spirit of God was in our hearts, and a night that seemed destined to end in unleashed chaos came to a close in a majestic group demonstration of nonviolence.”<sup>24</sup> Church happened, and the reluctant man who had been called to “stand up” for God’s righteousness, justice and truth, had seen the evidence of the rarely tested power of lived faith. King emerged from the Montgomery bombing with a single-minded theme, the transformative power of love.

And he disposes of the guns. “I was much more afraid in Montgomery when I had a gun in my house,” he said. The gun was not only a symbol, but an incubator of fear, and its removal cleared for him a wider, freer space for God’s guidance and accompaniment. Removing the gun did not remove King’s fears or his uncertainties about the future, but it gave him a greater sense of freedom, forced him to reckon soberly with death and “to deal with it”.

There was too much power in the gun, too much in its dark machinery that obscured from view the *basic tenet of the disciple to go the distance for*

*peace*. The gun enabled violent desires to run their course to the end. The transformative kitchen experience—and his mystical encounter with Jesus—pushed him to choose between God and the gun.

For the gun introduced a supernatural power of its own. It felt too much like a pagan god. A god full of cunning, who like all pagan deities, will do everything to enslave you to the basest inclinations of the flesh.<sup>25</sup> The pagan god of the gun will promise virtue and honor, and he will dull your wits by his solemn processions; you will sit around your television sets in ecstatic exaltation of his glittering panoply of tricks and terrors. You will soon be transported into another world; you will be amazed at your new life, “wild and glorious”; and you will revel in your new freedom; you will feel emancipated from traditional moral obligations; you will feel a “strange amoral freedom”.<sup>26</sup> But soon this pagan world of the gun will close in around you; you will shudder in its coldness; for he will lead you finally to world that is “impervious to grace”, a world that has declared “grace inoperative or even non-existent”, a world that mock the Prince of Peace.<sup>27</sup> If Christians cannot serve God and Mammon, as we are told by preacher and prophet, then neither can they serve God and Mars?<sup>28</sup>

## **Learning the Language of Peace from the Civil Rights Movement**

King's witness to the beloved community illuminates not only the genius of the strategy called "nonviolent direct action," but the extent to which the movement enacted a form of radical Christian faith that goes the distance for forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. After her beating and torture by white police officials in the town of Winona, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer said (in an astonishing remark that comes to us from a place far beyond our resentment and revenge), "It wouldn't solve any problems for me to hate whites just because they hate me. Oh, there's so much hate, only God has kept the Negro sane."

Out one of the most gun-slinging cultures in the history of the world, King emerges as one of history's most eloquent proponents of nonviolence—and he delivers his message given not only to whites, but to blacks. And, importantly, King's political goals became more confrontational as his theology of the non-violent God gained sharper focus. The scholar Aldon Morris has written that "nonviolence was practically unheard-of in Southern black communities before the Civil Rights Movement", although of course there was disagreement among African American organizers on this matter.<sup>29</sup> To be sure, historians Charles Payne and Timothy Tyson have indicated in their important work that much more research needs to be done on the degree to which the organizing tradition has at times depended on "the attitude of local people toward self-defense" as a necessary dimension of its success.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the tradition of nonviolent direct action reached

towards a different outcome, towards the possibility of redemption, reconciliation and beloved community. In the story of the Civil Rights Movement, we see something remarkable: that the men and women who made up the Civil Rights Movement in the South responded to terrorism by a massive show of non-violent force; they responded to hate with love.

Speaking last fall [2001] at the University of Virginia, the Lutheran Bishop of Berlin-Germany, Wolfgang Huber, concluded his lecture, "Truth, Guilt and Reconciliation: Christian Faith in a Violent World," by asking the question, "What is the significance of the message of reconciliation for the dialogue of the religions in a world of violence? How can the strength of religions help to overcome violence?"

Bishop Huber responded by observing that the most compelling insight gained from the experiences of the twentieth century is "the conviction that nonviolence has to take precedence over all means of violence". Perhaps we might be able to "forge across the differences of religious belief, culture and traditions a common understanding of basic human rights". Clearly however this is the urgent work of the present time: to find common language from the particularities of our own spiritual and intellectual situations which acknowledges the "preferential option for nonviolence".

The preferential option for nonviolence may not always achieve results consistent with its ideals. Still, those of us who live by the teachings of

Jesus and find inspiration in the examples of St. Francis, Gandhi, Bonhoeffer, and King, that the gun will never bring peace; that violence can never reveal the true grain of the universe; that preferential option for nonviolence sets before us the mandate that human life must be preserved at all costs, and that the disposition toward nonviolent resolution of conflict must always be the direction in which we err in our lives with God through this world of great beauty and great violence.

**Things Fall Apart:  
The Movement Abandons King and the Vision of Beloved  
Community**

By summer of 1965, the vision of beloved community had begun to splinter. SNCC embraced a new vision of racial progress that deemed King's devotion to the nonviolent God of Jesus Christ quaint and irrelevant. Still, it was not until the summer of 1966 that the message of black power hit white America hard. James Meredith, the airforce veteran who in the fall of 1962 who integrated the University of Mississippi under the hostile scrutiny of Governor Ross Barnett and the protection of a federalized national guard, had assumed a low profile as a student in the intervening years. But on June 5, 1966, the inscrutable James Meredith launched a one-man demonstration to show the nation that conditions for blacks had changed in Mississippi.<sup>31</sup> "The old order was passing," he said, black people can now "stand up as men with nothing to fear."<sup>32</sup> Meredith would walk two hundred miles from

Memphis to Jackson to demonstrate the point. Sadly, he did not walk ten miles before he was shot in the head and neck by a white terrorist and was rushed to a hospital back in Memphis. Within hours, news reports had refocused attention on civil rights issues in Mississippi, a feat which SNCC had been incapable of doing since the media blitz south during the 1964 Summer Project.

At the time of the shooting, members of the newly refigured Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Stokely Carmichael, Cleveland Sellers, and Stanley Wise had been in Little Rock, Arkansas, seeking to energize floundering projects, but the three men drove to Memphis to see Meredith when they heard the news. Although Meredith had no use for SNCC, he agreed that the march should be continued in his absence. The “March Against Fear”, as it was called, soon became a media showcase for black power and a new direction in the Civil Rights Movement, a story made all the more striking by the presence of Martin Luther King Jr. alongside Carmichael and Sellers. Dr. King wanted the march to focus national attention on President Johnson’s new Civil Rights Bill, which included a range of anti-discrimination protections as well as open-housing provisions.<sup>33</sup> But Carmichael and the other SNCC participants wanted the march to highlight the black liberation movement’s break with King’s Christian pacifism. “I’m not gonna beg the white man for anything I deserve,” Carmichael said, “I’m gonna take it.”



Back in Mississippi, beneath a hot summer sun, (both had taken part in the 1964 Summer Project), Carmichael and Sellers charted out a new course for the Civil Rights Movement. Black dignity should be preserved by any means necessary, they told onlookers and reporters. “Does that include violence?” Sellers was asked frequently. “Any means necessary is self-explanatory,” was his response.<sup>34</sup> To add muscle to the point, the Louisiana-based black paramilitary group, the Deacons for Defense and Justice, escorted the marchers on their pilgrimage to Jackson. (Perhaps the sight of these armed black men kept Sam Bowers’ newest sycophant, Byron de la Beckwith, from engaging in business any more serious than occasional interruptions in his pickup truck.<sup>35</sup>)

On Thursday, June 16, when the marchers—now 600 strong—stopped for a mass rally with local blacks in Greenwood, Carmichael was arrested on the charge of trespassing on public property. Making bail a few hours later, he ascended to the speaker’s platform and electrified the audience by howling out, “every courthouse in Mississippi should be burnt down tomorrow so we can get rid of the dirt.”<sup>36</sup> “This is the 27th time I have been arrested,” he continued, “I ain’t going to jail no more. I ain’t going to jail no more.” Over the thunderous applause, Stokely asked the crowd, “From now on when they ask you what you want, you know what to tell ‘em.” “We want Black Power!” he shouted.<sup>37</sup> “Black Power!” the people shouted back. “Black Power!”<sup>38</sup> If

that wasn't enough, the crowd began chanting, "Jingle bells, shotgun shells, freedom all the way. Oh, what fun it is to blast a trooperman away!"

Although King had not been in Greenwood to hear Carmichael's speech, on the days he rejoined the march, he tried to walk a fine line with reporters by maintaining his commitment to nonviolence without fully denouncing the message of black power. He said, "I'm not interested in power for power's sake, but I'm interested in power that is moral, that is right and that is good."<sup>39</sup> The possession of power is important, King acknowledged, but the seizing of power must proceed in dialectical kinship with the responsibilities of love.<sup>40</sup> He was less reluctant to speak of his disappointment with SNCC, the separatist rhetoric and policies and the threat of violence. He had tolerated the presence of the Deacons for Defense and Justice; he had tolerated Carmichael's vitriolic speeches; he had listened patiently as certain SNCC members argued that whites should be kept out of the march, but he was losing patience.<sup>41</sup> "I'm sick and tired of violence," he told an audience in Yazoo City, "I'm sick of the war in Vietnam. I'm tired of war and conflict in the world. I'm tired of shooting. I'm tired of hatred. I'm tired of selfishness. I'm tired of evil. I'm not going to use violence, no matter who says it."<sup>42</sup> He reasserted several times his own unyielding commitment to an interracial movement. "We must never forget that there are some white people in the United States just as determined to see us free as we are to be free ourselves."<sup>43</sup>

Above all, he reaffirmed his commitment to the goal of “a truly brotherly society, the creation of the beloved community.”<sup>44</sup> King’s polemics against white racism were second to no one’s, but his commitment to Christianity “offered him no outlet in the rhetoric of violence”.<sup>45</sup> “We have a power that’s greater than all the guns in Greenwood or the state of Mississippi, a power greater than all the guns and bombs of all the armies in the world. We have the power of our souls!”

But as the years closed in, and the daybreak of freedom gave way to “midnight in our world” and the congregational shouts of “amen” and “preach it” turned into jeers and boos, the symbol of the Cross, which King had preached throughout his life to explain the meaning of non-violence and the sacrifices of black protesters—the Cross again became central.<sup>46</sup>

“The cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian one must take up his cross, with all of its difficulties and agonizing and tension-packed content and carry it until that very cross leaves its mark upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering.”<sup>47</sup>

### **A Modest Proposal to the Younger Generation**

At the Jesuit university, where I taught in Baltimore for ten years, more than eighty percent of the student body was actively involved in service learning, in giving time to various social justice initiatives throughout the

city: at the Catholic Worker House, in the soup kitchens, in after school tutorials, in AIDS hospices, in Habitat for Humanity. The social imagination of the Catholic tradition—with its keen sense of the presence of God in the poor—no doubt accounts for the almost instinctive social convictions of young Catholics. But I have been heartened to find the same kind of passion for justice in many of my undergraduates at the University of Virginia. Two weeks ago, more than fifty students spent spring break in Atlanta, revisiting the Civil Rights Movement while working in the inner city of a modern metropolis. Students have created Habitat chapters, after-school tutorials, Big Brother mentoring programs, and initiatives in reconciliation. These students inspire me to hopeful thoughts and innovations in service and learning; these students keep me from despair.

Let me say finally to the students here tonight: You are our hope. You are our future. Do not relinquish responsibility for the future to the men in high places who believe that the hate-filled road of war is the only way to peace. “Politics is what we dare to imagine,” wrote Paul Wellstone, the late senator from Minnesota.

When we look at the story of the Civil Rights Movement in the South, of those women and men who finally risked everything for the beloved community, who bore witness to redemption and reconciliation, we see illuminated a rich and compelling way of life; we see, too, an invitation. That invitation says: come go with me to a new land. That invitation says: step

into the “strange new world” of God. That invitation says: Dare to dream.  
Dare to change the world. Dare to imagine a world without guns. Dare to  
believe: “Peace I leave you; my peace I give you.”

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<sup>1</sup> King, *The Papers*, volume III, p. 458.

2. "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (as revised in conference, April 29, 1962)," The Charles Sherrod Papers, file 24, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

3. "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," April 29, 1962. Charles Sherrod Papers, File 24. State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>4</sup> King, *T Papers*, volume III, p. 453.

5 Cited in Houston Roberson, *Fighting the Good Fight: A History of Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, 1865-1977* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1997), p. 191.

6 Claiborne Carson, "The Boycott that Changed Dr. King's Life," *New York Times Magazine*, 7, 1996.

7 King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 121-22.

8 Cited in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 54.

9 King, *The Autobiography*, p. 77.

10 King, *The Autobiography*, p. 76.

11 King, *Autobiography*, p. 77.

12 King cited in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 56.

13 King, *The Autobiography*, p. 77.

14 King, *The Autobiography*, p. 77.

15 King cited in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 59.

16 King, *The Autobiography*, p. 77.

17 King, *The Autobiography*, p. 78.

18 King, *The Autobiography*, p. 78.

19 King cited in "Notes on MIA Mass Meeting at First Baptist Church," in *The Papers*, volume III, p. 114.

20 King, *Autobiography*, p. 79.

21 King, *Autobiography*, p. 79.

22 Cited in *The Papers*, volume III, p. 115 [and elsewhere].

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<sup>23</sup> Jo Ann Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), p. 132.

<sup>24</sup> King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 138.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Lassere, *War and the Gospel*, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Lassere, *War and the Gospel*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Lassere, *War and the Gospel*, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Lassere, *War and the Gospel*, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Wesley Hogan, p. 28.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Hogan, "Radical Manners", p. 29.

31. In 1988, James Meredith would support former klansman, David Duke, for governor of Louisiana.

32. James Meredith cited in William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). p. 32.

33. David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 476.

34. Sellers, *The River of No Return*, p.

35. Reed Massengill explains, "Had King's movements during the Meredith March been less erratic and better publicized, it is likely he might have met his fatal bullet earlier. While they had most often focused their hatred on targets in their home state of Mississippi, the White Knights reviled King and his ability to use the media to his advantage. King was, after all, doing a far better job than the Klan of swaying public opinion. Former Klan Titan Delmar Dennis remembered a 1965 planning session at which Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers asked him whether or not he could find a volunteer sniper to assassinate King as he traveled through Mississippi on a trip unrelated to the Meredith March. Bowers had learned that King would be using a highway between Philadelphia and Meridian, and planned what would have become his most ambitious Project Four. Snipers were to be placed at either end of a bridge along King's route, and would be armed and ready to fire high-powered rifles as his car

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approached or withdrew. Beneath the bridge, dynamite would be planted as a safeguard, in case the snipers missed their mark. Dennis reported the plan to his FBI contacts, and they made sure King changed his travel route, thwarting the White Knights' attempt on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life." [*Portrait of a Racist: The Man Who Killed Medgar Evers?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 241 footnote, spell out, pp. 240-241.

36. Cited in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 481.

37. David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 481.

38. SNCC members Willie Ricks had tried out the "Black Power" slogan during the Greenwood march before Carmichael brought it to national attention in his own inimitable way. Ricks, also known as "The Reverend" for his homiletical flair, warned in his speech at the Yazoo City fairgrounds of "white blood flowing" and of a new black militancy. After Ricks received enthusiastic ovations for his radical sentiments, Carmichael took center stage and made the speech that would change the course of the movement. (see Gene Roberts, "The Story of Snick," *Black Protest in the Sixties*, edited by August Meier and Elliot Rudwick [Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970], p. 139.)

39. Cited in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 485.

40. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Black Power," *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 43.

41. Garrow, *Bearing The Cross*, p. 485.

42. Cited in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 485.

43. King cited in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 488.

44. Cited in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, p. 488.

45. Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King*, p. 108.



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<sup>46</sup> King cited in Marshall Frady, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (New York: Viking, 2002), p. 189.

<sup>47</sup> King cited in John Howard Yoder, "The Power Equation, Jesus and the Politics of King," *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishers, 1997), p. 144.