

Untimely Action

Letter from Birmingham Jail, Paragraphs 6-12

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What is at issue here is the kingdom of God. What is the kingdom of God like and what is our responsibility in helping to make it a reality in the present moment?

My friend and former ministry colleague Greg Horton used to say, “If this is how we shall live, than this is how we must live.” What he meant was—if in some future, hoped-for reign of God we are going to live as people of peace, kindness, love, inclusion, and justice, then, as Christians, we should begin living that way already. This has all sorts of implications. If we think that the kingdom of God will have a different economic order, then we need to do all we can now to live into that different economy. If we think that the kingdom of God will welcome and include all people, despite their cultural, racial, religious and other differences, then we should, right now, create communities that include and welcome such difference. If we think that the reign of God will be a time of greater respect for the natural environment, with simpler, more sustainable living, then we should begin living more simply and sustainably. And if we think that in God’s time there will be no violence or war, then in our lives right now we should be people of peace and nonviolence.

Unlike many who believe the reign of God is an ideal for which we hope, King and others, including my friend Greg, believe that it is a practical, realistic ethic which we should apply to our contemporary circumstances. I happen to agree.

And it is also deep within our religious heritage in the United Church of Christ. Both of our predecessor denominations, the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches share in a Reformed theological tradition. That tradition has always believed that people of Christian faith have a responsibility to shape society around our religious and moral values.

The Civil Rights Movement in America may have been a social and political movement, but it was also a religious movement. In fact, historian David Chappell argues that it was primarily a religious movement. A religious revival or awakening, in fact. The leaders of the movement were motivated by their vision of the kingdom of God and viewed God as the leader the movement.

They put Christian belief into practice with their nonviolent direct action campaigns. These tactics may have been inspired by Gandhi, but they resonated well with New Testament teaching, as even Gandhi knew. One of the great outcomes of the Civil Rights Movement is that they made what were viewed as Christian ideals a matter of practical behavior. The nonviolent campaign, including its preparation and training, were incarnations of Christian theology.

The goal was to suffer, but suffer in a way that was efficient and bore results. Some have called this the “vocation of suffering.” For African-Americans, this particularly resonated.

Black people were suffering already. If they did nothing, they and their children would continue to suffer. Violence, poverty, and the emotional abuse that Dr. King describes in the Letter were typical black experiences under segregation. The Movement asked for people to increase that suffering, but with a purpose and goal in mind.

In Birmingham, the demonstrators had to sign a pledge card that read as follows:

I hereby pledge myself—my person and body—to the nonviolent movement. Therefore I will keep the following ten commandments:

1. Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. Remember always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation—not victory.
3. Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. Pray daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.
5. Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all men might be free.
6. Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. Seek to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.
9. Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. Follow the directions of the movement and of the captain of a demonstration.

That is a rigorous code by which to live, and a deeply Christian one.

Though this ethic calls for sacrifice and suffering, it ultimately evokes the power of the person who adopts it. As the great activist Fannie Lou Hamer said, “We have to build our own power.”

For when the Civil Rights marchers suffered at the hands of white people, they did so not because of subordination or passivity. They did so freely, as their own agents, motivated by faith, courage, and hope. John Lewis described it as “presenting one’s humanity to white people.” And this is why segregation could not survive the movement. For segregation relied upon the black person to be beat down into an inferior position. Once black people made their own choices and claimed their own power, then they were never going to return to the way things had been.

So, the nonviolent ethic succeeded because it created tension and coercion. But instead of violent of force-based coercion, it was a love and peace-based coercion. It was a creative tension that led to a new world.

Traditional liberal approaches to segregation had promoted education and patience, believing that over time society would change. This is what the moderate Christian ministers criticized Dr. King for upsetting. This is the view that somehow believes that time itself will heal.

But the Civil Rights Movement believed differently. The only change that will occur is what you make happen. And black people were tired of waiting, because that waiting meant enduring more violence, poverty, and emotional abuse. It meant continuing to tell your children that many white people believed them to be inferior.

Instead of incremental change over time, they believed in something closer to a

conversion experience. The demonstrators were truly evangelists, witnessing to the world and making converts as they went.

This wasn't just an ethic leading to social and political change, it was a fulfillment of the Great Commission—to preach and live the good news of Jesus Christ, making disciples out of those you encountered.

So, I return to the question I started with today: What is the kingdom of God like and what is our responsibility in helping to make it a reality in the present moment?

The “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and the movement it participated in give us an answer to those questions, including practical steps for how to incarnate the reign of God in our everyday lives.

In the last fifty years our culture has fortunately changed a great deal. Those advocating for social justice generally don't have police dogs and water cannons turned on them. We are generally not required to embrace a vocation of suffering to the degree that our black sisters and brothers did in the 1960's. Their sacrifice has forever made living the Christian life easier for all of us.

We can still bring this kingdom ethic to bear on the issues that concern us. At this year's United Church of Christ General Synod, I sensed a shift in our justice and witness priorities. In recent years, our denomination has been known for its focus on LGBT equality. That remains a high priority, but we seem to have passed the tipping point, with new victories for equality coming every day. The Synod celebrated those victories and committed itself to the hard work that still remains.

But our priority seemed to me to shift to ecological concerns, primary responding to climate change. We passed one resolution calling for churches and church members to reduce their carbon footprints. Another committed us to engaging fossil fuel companies in actions that would reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and increase investments in clean and renewable energy sources. It also called upon us to divest from those companies which did not meet “best in class” criteria. I came away from General Synod with the impression that the UCC wants to become a key public witness for a more sustainable, environmentally-friendly way of life.

If we to become evangelists for sustainability, or whatever cause you are passionate about, let's do it the right way. Let us take action rooted in prayer and service, love and sacrifice, and daily meditation upon the life and teachings of Jesus. For when our action incarnates the kingdom of God, we not only imagine another world is possible, we help to make it a reality.