

KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE  
SEVENTH ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE  
SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CON-  
FERENCE BY WYATT TEE WALKER, EXECUTIVE  
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RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

We gather here this week in the wake of one of America's most heinous domestic crimes. The wanton murder of six young people- four little girls and two young boys- in Birmingham, during the past two weeks cannot help but sear the conscience and souls of our national community. As awful as it has been, the great temptation may be to blot the terrible deed from our memory and hope and pray it will never happen again. Realism demands recognition that the stark truth is that it will happen again, and again with increasing intensity unless we cut out its causal basis, limb, branch, tree and root. We have sown the wind and reaped the whirlwind.

It appears that in this year of "Emancipation," there really is no emancipation. We have been duped, or have duped ourselves into believing that the chains had been broken, when in truth, we have only been chained more securely. Half-freedom has in many instances been worse than no freedom at all. The compromise during Reconstruction was not only a legal compromise, it was also a moral compromise. (As a nation,) what we have sown, we are reaping.

Blame-fixing is at best negative. Perhaps the more helpful approach is diagnosis and then surgery. This is the implicit and explicit meaning of our theme for this Convention. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference is church-oriented and thusly stands in the Hebraic-Christian tradition with some

inflexible categorical imperatives. We must, here and now grapple with rightings the wrongs of chattel slavery. The postponement of one hundred years has only compounded the difficulty we would have inevitably encountered in doing it completely in 1963. We have faltered miserably. White America largely became conscienceless and black America settled into demoralizing passivity. None of our hands are clean. The blood of six children stains the hands of us all. What is the salvation from this body of death which grips the vitality of our nation? Its portent is found in the incessant rumblings generated by the Supreme Court Decision of 1954. It has emboldened itself in the summer thunderings from Birmingham, Alabama. The wildering circle of concern now engulfs the nation and we are hard pressed to meet its challenge before it is too late.

For academic purposes, we might retrace the path by which we have come to our moment of truth in race relations; perhaps it is at once our moment of truth for the nation's destiny.

Following the Supreme Courts Decision of 1954, the Negro community in America hopefully viewed the promise of its implementation as an index that we of the Negro minority has an active ally in our struggle to reach the mainstream of American Life. How woefully disappointed we were when it became apparent that the Federal fiat outlawing segregation in public education was de facto, little more than a legal pronouncement. Compromise again.

The successful Mountgomery bus protest shattered the apparent calm in American race relations and introduced to the disfranchised Negro, South and North, a new technique that engendered new hope that we might find our way out of the wastehowling

wilderness by another path. Legal decrees alone were far too costly in time and money. This was the first eddy to develop in what appears to be a concentric evolution of what now promises to be a tidal wave. Then on its heels came the Sit-In Movement that swept our Southland like the east wind; and not long thereafter, the Freedom Ride which involved the national community. The forays at Albany served notice on a recalcitrant and previously inflexible South that something had to give. Each instance here catalogued, built the momentum of national concern with what had been referred to with considerable deference, the "Negro problem."

The infant of revolution born at Montgomery, weaned in the Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides and weathering the adolescence of Albany came full grown at Birmingham. The confrontation of Birmingham with the demands of Justice and morality spawned children in its own image with amazing speed all over the nation, South and North.

The moral issues were joined at Birmingham and the nation gave its affirmation at the Great March on August 28th before the feet of Abraham Lincoln and all across the continent and the world via radio, television and Telstar.

The historic assemblage of a quarter million nonviolent pilgrims for Freedom alerted our nation that we must deal with our primary domestic issues now. "Freedom Now" could no longer be categorized as the irresponsible rantings of extremist forces. The die had been cast. Our nation's heritage, the Constitution of the United States, the Decrees of the Supreme Court, the moral order of the universe, the angels in heaven, God Himself, chorused with Negroes and whites the demand, "Freedom Now."

Why "Freedom Now?" The history of the Negro's struggle for right and privilege reveals only sketchy progress that has been painfully slow. The prophets of inevitability have insufficient empirical data to justify that "time would solve the problem." Dr. King has clearly noted that time has served the purpose of evil in this instance more than it has served the purpose of good. This present moment of history strongly suggest that there is little room in the soul of the Negro for interminable patience.

It is difficult for me to believe that the Kennedy brothers, as sincere and as well-intentioned as they may be, have yet grasped the full seriousness of the present tragedy in Birmingham. Do we, must we, wait until the four little girls are blonde and blue-eyed? As bizarre as this may sound, I ask, then, what does it require to shake our sensibilities enough to thwart the recurrence of that which is already terribly bad?

Somewhere we must find the courage and very, very soon, to substitute courageous morality for conventional morality. The cost of doing that which is right may be high, but if our nation is to survive, we must pay the just dues of justice and morality. In another difficult hour of our nation's history, Abraham Lincoln had no precedent whatever to do what he did. It not only cost him the presidency, it cost his very life. And yet, the cause for which he died was of far more important consequence than the life of a single earthling.

I have no concern whatsoever as to who wins the election in 1964. Millions of my people, both white and black, suffer from the dread disease of segregation and discrimination. If they are not healed soon and its spread immediately checked, it will

not matter very much who is elected in 64 or 74.

Courageous morality could very well risk and lose the presidency; courageous morality has cost many ministers their pulpits; courageous morality has demanded the security of countless jobs; Medgar Evers and the Birmingham children paid for it with their lives.

We must not be persuaded or cajoled to relax our thrust. We have seen that pausing now would only allow the forces of the opposition to re-group and strengthen themselves as they did following the decision of the Supreme Court of 1954. We have learned well the lesson that "later" for the most part, has meant "never."

"Freedom Now" the present Negro demand is abidingly appropriate because its primary rationale is that it is right and moral and just.

What are the Demands of Freedom Now? The specific items are to a large measure encompassed in the Omnibus civil rights bill presently before the Congress of the United States. Title I. Voting Rights. Title II. Public Accommodations Title III. Desegregation of Education. Title IV. Establishment of Human Relations Services. Title V. Extension of the Life of the Commission on Civil Rights. Title VI. Non-Discrimination in Federal Assisted Programs. Title VII. Commission on Employment opportunities. In addition to these measures, the President's package of bills certainly should be broadened to include an FEPC section that is enforceable. Its breadth should include empowering the Attorney General to enter any case

where a violation of civil rights occurs. Keep before you that this is legislation only and is effective only insofar as it is vigorously implemented.

The ancillary forces that are needed to make this legislation meaningful is the development of Federal programs geared to the urgency of the problem. To be sure it is a herculean undertaking but the Federal Government has been as much or more a participant in the segregation business as any other quarter of the national community. If it is to be true to its responsibility, it must make a commitment whereby it is the daily concern of the Administration as much as the rest of the life of the nation is its daily concern. Add to this the unquestioned support of the Chief Executive and the members of his Cabinet, buttressed by the aligned resources of the nation's religious community, the impossible horizons of "Freedom Now" will not in reality be quite so distant. Reduced to its lowest common denominator, the demands of "Freedom Now!" invoke an elementary American credo: Every citizen has the opportunity to explore the total capacity of his life and ambitions without regard to race, color or previous ancestry. He may move untrammelled by his identity throughout the veins and arteries of our land with the guarantee of self-respect and dignity to his person. His specificity becomes infinitely less important than his fundamentum.

What are the Responsibilities of "Freedom Now?" The demand "Freedom Now" is not meant to infer that the grantees will at last have achieved the ultimate panacea. It precludes

responsibility not alone upon the Negro but upon an entire sensitive citizenry. Hollow arguments persist that if the Negro were granted all of his demands this afternoon, opportunity would go wasting for want of candidates for the new order. It is unnecessary in this knowledgeable company to say that the causal basis for that kind of condition existing is the very system itself whose riddance we seek. Nevertheless, even though all of the opportunities once denied, are made available, if there are no takers at all for whatever reason, this is still not a justifiable reason to deny any, full opportunity. I want my chance to flunk on my own. Do not flunk me arbitrarily on the basis of my individual or group identity. I insist on the right to flunk without anybody's assistance. If the condition of granting me my full opportunity hinges on getting every single Negro "ready," we don't stand much of a chance this side of 2063. "Freedom Now" responsibly underscores an oft-quoted declaration, "Ready or not, here we come."

By the same token, the disfranchised must be responsible enough to rise or fall with the new opportunity. Desegregation and integration broaden and heighten the competition. However, two qualifications must be noted; 1. The fact must be faced that the Negro who is most "unready," provided with the realized demands of "Freedom Now" will inevitably enjoy a wider selectivity in his daily pursuits. His life and experience will never be as restricted as it once was. No longer would he be confined to a Negro theater, or a Negro job, or a Negro bank, or a Negro restroom or a Negro anything per se. At least he has the opportunity to take a crack at all or some of it so far as he is individually able.

Thus, the responsibility that accompanies the spirit of "Freedom Now" is merely both sides of the same coin. It evidences the interrelatedness of American citizenship and more especially the interrelatedness of humanity. On the one hand, it insists that the unoppressed brook no obstacle to insure the immediate relief of the other from oppression. White America has a stake in this struggle. On the other hand, it demands that the oppressed must not use his oppression as the excuse for every failure.

This then bespeaks the universalism which must pervade the struggle for full liberty. "Freedom Now" punctuates the truth that the scope of human relations is so broadened that it reaches beyond the immediate concerns of the Negro community. This is not in any way designed to mean a diminution of what the Negro confronts. Rather it heightens the basic justice and morality that we demand. "Freedom Now" demands of us responsibility to see that within the embrace of what we seek must be included without any reservations the American Indian, the Mexican and the Puerto Ricans.

This means for America, basically, monumental sociological change and with it the reaction against that which in the very near future will stake its life and morality against the inevitable change that must come in our society if we are to survive as a nation. Our capitalistic and materialistic bent must be altered or the rights of Negroes, Indians, Jews or anyone else will not be guaranteed for very long.

What are the Techniques of "Freedom Now?" The basic approach of the nonviolent revolution will not change. It will

be marked by its frequency and intensity. It is already evident that the South will not be the chief focus of activity. The entire nation will feel the brunt of the nonviolent forces demand, "Freedom Now!" The South will see most of the activity focused on schools and public accommodations; the North's activity will center chiefly on employment and housing. In no event will any form of discrimination go unchallenged.

It has become remarkably clear in the national community that we have a problem. A few months ago, race relations was only the concern of a small minority in our nation and a hand full of "agitators." Significantly, that which was kindled in Birmingham amid fire hoses and police dogs and given a tremendous vote of confidence at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, has drawn active support from the great majority that had been at best "uncommitted." Hundreds of thousands have come off the fence. The religious forces have become signally involved in a public issue as never before. The above-mentioned and the civil rights legislation before the Congress all date to Birmingham. Birmingham has become a watershed of history in the nonviolent revolution in which we are engaged. Much of our convention in years to come will be dated with such phrases as, "Before Birmingham" and "Since Birmingham."

Yet, with all of its significance, Birmingham has not been quite enough to convince the powers that be, locally, state wide and nationally, that an atmosphere of urgency exists. Despite the civil rights package being the "most sweeping civil rights legislation ever proposed," the political overtones of the 64 elections seem much too apparent. In the face of the seven bombings since the Birmingham agreement, including that

which cost the lives of six and the injury of a score more, the Department of Justice is still using "policy" as a guide line. Instead of preventive measures being invoked, there is still only the disposition to give ambulance service. It is nonsensical to believe that two envoys to Birmingham will be any more effective in really getting at the root of the problem than sending two envoys to South Viet Nam will resolve the dilemma<sup>in</sup> there. Southern racist political figures must be made to understand that the Federal court orders are to be enforced, party affiliation and concerns notwithstanding. Who might gainsay that if Barnett had been jailed in the travesty of the University of Mississippi, perhaps, we would not have had to contend with George C. Wallace. Our kid glove treatment of the real anarchists and subversives- the Barnetts and the Wallaces- has cost us a terrible price in human life. Paradoxically, I submit to you that in the one single instance where the Federal government has moved, it has been against Negroes intimately involved in the desegregation movement. How despicable that Slater King, Dr. Anderson and other leaders of the nonviolent movement in Albany, Georgia are now under Federal indictment for "obstructing justice" and "perjury." There is no federal indictment against the sheriff who caned Attorney C. B. King- but it is under investigation; there is no indictment against the peace officer who bludgeoned Mrs. King into unconsciousness and killed her unborn child- but it is under investigation; there is no indictment against countless acts of police brutality and murder that take place all over the south- but it is under investigation. So, now, the Department of Justice takes to trial the leadership of a local

community who have sparked the fight against the illegal system under which they are forced to live. The maximum penalty- \$10,000.00 and or 10 years in prison.

Organized labor has failed us in at least one respect that can be pointed up by the experience of Danville, Virginia. In Danville, as in other southern cities, the legal maneuvering goes on endlessly. Picketing, an established protest device is now being harassed with all kinds of restrictions and codes now that Negroes have employed in their fight against segregation. The Dan River Mills, with all of its force of organized labor, has been absolutely silent when the right to picket was limited by city ordinance to x number of pickets. When they wake up twenty years- or maybe ten years from now, and automation is full blown, they will be crying to high heaven about the unconstitutionality of picketing restrictions that were born solely to keep black people psychologically and economically enslaved. Where are their voices now? The time to is now. But the beleaguered forces of the Negro community have not heard from organized labor in Danville.

Other quarters of the national community have been equally as dispassionate. Thus the "Freedom Now" forces must devise some way to command the attention emoluments of citizenship are secured once, now and forever.

One of the ways the attention of the nation might be claimed to spur a creative and immediate resolution program to the problem could well be the implementation of a national program of economic withdrawal during the coming Christmas season.

rationale could be: "Since there's no Christmas for the children, as a mark of my penitence and commitment, we have no Christmas at our house."

A massive refusal to buy on the part of the Negro community of good will would throw the business world into shock, and only then, will we gain the support of the nation's leaders to exert some initiative in eliminating the segregation and discrimination.

This is not as far-fetched as it may appear. The ebb and flow in every community determines to a large degree the character and morality of its politics. In countless communities, the control of the flow of dollars by the nonviolent movement has proved a long lever- if not the strongest lever to alter the established patterns in race relations. It has already been demonstrated that a national conference on selective buying can be called. The strategic choice of consumer commodities as targets, nationally, could even get some attention from the bigwigs of Wall Street. Someone has said, appropriately, "If we do not talk, it screams." Just consider how swiftly the established patterns could be altered if in three-quarters of the country the struggle for self-respect and human dignity has an impact on the forces of the business world. Though it is a seldom-mentioned fact, business leaders have a responsibility to national

unity. In fact, the moment has come in the development of the civil rights revolution that we are forced (by delays and painfully slow progress) that we must on some appointed day at some appointed hour temporarily immobilize the nation until she acts on our

plea for justice and morality that has been too long denied? Is the day far-off that major transportation centers would be deluged with mass acts of civil disobedience; airports, train stations, bus terminals, the traffic of large cities, interstate commerce, would be halted by the bodies of witnesses non-violently insisting on "Freedom Now." I suppose a nation-wide work stoppage might attract enough attention to persuade some one to do something to get this monkey of segregation and discrimination off our backs, once, now and forever, Will it take one or all of these? Of course there is always the fast unto death. Why not? Are we not daily politically and economically strangled to death by the thousands under the present system.

Finally, let me say, there is no guarantee that the equality of opportunity will come this year, or within the next five. It's possible that it may not come in ten- but this will not be short of national disaster. But even if it is deferred another 100 years the cry will remain, "Freedom Now."

In the midst of daily humiliation, where we are still forced to be guided in ordinary pursuits by signs that say "white" and "colored," even if it must be said through clenched teeth, our cry remains "Freedom Now."

As we recognize the realities of continuing job discrimination and know full well that we are still the last hired and the first fired, even with no prospect of a pay-check, unfailingly our demand persists, "Freedom Now."

When we return to the Negro ghetto at night, weary and foot-sore after a day of fruitless searching for a decent home in a neighborhood where we are able to pay the going price, despite

the frustration of open and subtle housing discrimination, we must insist, "Freedom Now."

There are times when we will tire of endless litigation, state by state, county by county, school board by school board, plaintiff by plaintiff in order that the children born in the loins of our bodies may have the opportunity of a desegregated education, our cry remains "Freedom Now."

We will meet the acid-tone of hate and prejudice as we move into newly opened opportunities of public accommodations and just as we have experienced the sly perpetuation of hotel discrimination at this convention through devious chicanery, late at night or early in the morning, unlodged and un-fed, our witness persists, "Freedom Now!"

There will be moments when we will not be riding the crest of great demonstrations that lead to success; our efforts will sputter and utterly fail. Candidates for jail will be scarce, sufficient bond money non-existent, apathy deeply entrenched, but our cry must remain, "Freedom Now!"

Our flesh will tear under the assault of police dogs, our bodies will literally break under the forces of billy sticks, we will not be able to stand before fire hoses, our spirits will be crushed by reprisal and fear but our cry must remain "Freedom Now."

Even as we stand in the rubble of burned and bombed churches or at the brier of a slain Medgar Evers or hear the anguished cry of little girls dying in Sunday school and the prospect of the damning of the unborn, our cry must remain "Freedom Now."

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