

UNIT 4
FROM THE PCA TO THE PRESENT DAY

I/ The Upheaval of the 1960's

II/ The Rise of the Religious Right

“It would be too easy to simply identify Jesus with a political party, to simply put him on the left or on the right... in the end he doesn’t belong on either one... No political platform is nearly large enough to contain Christ and the full complement of his teachings. The ethic of the new community demands humble participation, maybe even realizing that the solutions to complex social issues and problems transcend party platforms. The ethic of the new community may demand that – like all things for its members – we recognize that we now see dimly, and not so clearly as those who have put Jesus on the left or on the right would like us to think.” –Stephen Nichols

III/ The Presbyterian Church in America

“When it is no longer possible to practice discipline in the church courts, then you must practice discipline in reverse and leave. But your leaving must be with tears, not with flags flying and bands playing.” –Francis Schaeffer

PCA 2025 Statistics

Presbyteries	87
Churches	1,673
Missions	286
Pastors	5,388
Total Membership	405,634

IV/ 2026 – ?

“It is important to remember that the publicly visible presence of Christian faith rests on the week-by-week gatherings of believers in grand churches, dingy storefronts, rented public schools, and magnificent cathedrals, where attention is paid to Scripture, where the faithful take part in the sacraments or ordinances of their churches, and where Christians share the joys and sorrows of their fellow believers. Newsworthy public events rest on a thick substratum of daily prayer, Bible reading, family worship, and interpersonal support (sometimes conflict) that rarely receive attention. As historian Leigh Eric Schmidt once perceptively wrote, ‘Most of the things that count about Christianity cannot be counted, like the warmth or coolness of prayer, the resonance or hollowness of scriptural words, the songs or silences of the saints in heaven, the presences or absences in the sacrament.’” –Mark Noll

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

April 16, 1963

My Dear Fellow Clergymen,

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities “unwise and untimely.” Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas ... But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of “outsiders coming in.” I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every Southern state with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some 85 affiliate organizations all across the South ... Several months ago our local affiliate here in Birmingham invited us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: 1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive; 2) negotiation; 3) self-purification; and 4) direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham ... Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of the country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal, and unbelievable facts. On the basis of these conditions Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the political leaders consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

Then came the opportunity last September to talk with some of the leaders of the economic community. In these negotiating sessions certain promises were made by the merchants—such as the promise to remove the humiliating racial signs from the

stores. On the basis of these promises Reverend Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to call a moratorium on any type of demonstrations. As the weeks and months unfolded we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. The signs remained. As in so many experiences in the past, we were confronted with blasted hopes, and the dark shadow of a deep disappointment settled upon us. So we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. So we decided to go through the process of self-purification. We started having workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, "are you able to accept the blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?"

You may well ask, "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.

My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It has been a tranquilizing Thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the

distinguished jurist of yesterday that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see the tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking in agonizing pathos: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?” when you take a cross country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” men and “colored” when your first name becomes “nigger” and your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title of “Mrs.” when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience

the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

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

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

The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations. He has to get them out. So let him march sometime; let him have his prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; understand why he must have sit-ins and freedom rides. If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. This is not a threat; it is a fact of history. So I have not said to my people, "Get rid of your discontent." But I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled through the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action.

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership in the community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, serve as the channel through which our just grievances could get to the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed. I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother. In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues with which the Gospel has no real concern," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

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

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,

M. L. King, Jr.

(King, Martin Luther, Jr.) "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Accessed 3/24/21

https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

the most important questions: Has Christianity in North America in the early twenty-first century once more entered into a wilderness? With religious pluralism the norm in the States and with Christian adherence declining rapidly in Canada, but also with many signs in the two societies of faithful Christian witness, how should believers evaluate the recent past?

Wilderness Once Again?

Evaluation, which must always be subject to debate, should probably begin by trying to chart a balance between gains and losses. On the debit side, it is clear that standards of Christian culture have lost considerable power. In French-speaking Canada, the Catholic Church's intrinsic authority is now only a shadow of what it once was. In the rest of Canada and in the United States, the Protestant mainstream that once dictated cultural values, provided standards for private and public morality, assumed primary responsibility for education, and powerfully shaped the media—that Protestantism is fragmented and culturally feeble. In short, institutions and values constructed with great sacrifice have been weakened and are now threatened with collapse.

On the credit side, it is clear that some varieties of Christian faith, such as Pentecostalism, advance with vigor. Others, such as Roman Catholicism, may be experiencing numerous difficulties but are nonetheless finding new respect and broadening their influence. Selected voluntary agencies (e.g., Bible societies) continue to expand. Christian contributions from African Americans, Native Americans, new ethnic communities, and a diverse array of white organizations (both traditional and innovative) offer the Balm of Gilead amid tumult, uncertainty, strife, and despair. The risks of Christian participation in politics have become increasingly obvious. Yet despite an upsurge of political demonization, fake news, and exaggerated fears, some Christians—in both countries and from positions on the spectrum from left to right—participate in public life charitably and altruistically.

From a completely different angle, it may be that toting up a balance sheet of gains and losses is more a North American way of analyzing the contemporary situation than a distinctly Christian way. A common feature of North American church history—whether written by the heirs of the Puritans, by Catholics, by representatives of sectarian bodies, or by mainline and evangelical Protestants—has been a tendency to concentrate on the churches in their relationship to the broader society. Matters of greatest interest (as also in this book) have been visible relationships: Who gained influence? Who gained respectability? Did a reforming

crusade work? Did an “outsider” pay too high a price to move to the “inside”? Or, in words once applied to Catholic Americans, “Has the immigrant kept the faith?”

Yet there are other ways to present the history of Christianity, ways that shift the focus back toward internal questions concerning the nature of the faith itself. For this kind of analysis, the internal character of the gospel provides a better interpretive standard than external measures of success. From the central fact of the Christian story, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, believers know that the most important things in life are likely to be the least conspicuous and that circumstances of severest defeat lead to the clearest apprehension of God. From the angle of the incarnation, in other words, the main goal in life is not to gain power but to undertake a journey guided by the ideals of the gospel.

In these terms, the history of *Christianity* in North America, as opposed to the history of *North American* Christianity, might not be so much about the gain or loss of cultural influence as about “signs of contradiction,” moments when the faith offered something unexpected to a person, a problem, a situation, or a region. Such “signs of contradiction” exist, for example, when slave owners—perhaps against their better judgment—give Bibles to their slaves. They are illustrated during the 1930s by the conversion of a few social radicals, such as Dorothy Day, from left-wing utopias to Christian faith. They are evident in documents such as Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, where he meditates on the secrets of divine providence rather than on the depths of Southern evil. They show up when a lionized public figure like Billy Graham apologizes for his earlier Cold War ardor and for private comments maligning Jews. They are illustrated supremely by the black acceptance of Christianity, offered as it was with a whip.

Whatever we conclude about the recent public fate of Christianity, we are able to see many “signs of contradiction” here as well. Among Roman Catholics, Hispanics were once largely neglected, yet from their midst has come the Cursillo movement as a lively stimulus to renewal in communities far removed from Hispanic cultures. The relaxing of sexual standards has been a most visible feature of public life since the 1960s, but the same period has also witnessed the dramatic growth of family-strengthening movements such as Marriage Encounter among both Protestants and Catholics. The list could go on. It is an age of cynicism in politics and business but also of dramatic conversions of men and women who have risen to the top. It is an age of unbridled literary license and proliferating literary nonsense but an age in which more excellent writing of a distinctly Christian cast is being published than ever before in North American history. It is a day of death and devastation in inner cities but also a day in which committed churches, ministers, and philanthropists organize heroic efforts to hold back the urban night. These “signs of contradiction” do not by themselves constitute a history, but they

do suggest that the analysis of Christian history may just as fruitfully follow the form of Christian faith as the norms of a particular host culture.

A Christian effort to tease out the meanings of history might also look for realities that mirror mysteries of the faith itself. For instance, we might try to describe individual events in what look like contradictory terms, just as it was possible for Israel to place itself in peril by prospering and for Jesus to share the profoundest truths with children. As an example from recent history, the pioneering fundamentalistic and Pentecostal use of the radio may have brought genuine Christian encouragement to many people at the same time it encouraged a pursuit of standards, influence, power, and wealth deeply alien to the Christian faith.

The heart of Christianity is defined by a "theology of the cross"—the belief that God displayed his greatest power and fullest revelation when Christ suffered most abjectly and most forlornly. For such a religion, we should not be surprised to discover some of the purest expressions of Christian faith in, say, the activities of Japanese American Christians in the internment camps of World War II or among the ill-paid teachers, Catholic and Protestant, who toil in the largely thankless task of educating young people in the faith.

Following the theme of the cross still further could lead us to view the passing of "Christian America" or "Christian Canada" as a blessing as well as a tragedy. So long as Protestants in the States and in English Canada or Catholics in Quebec thought the land belonged to them, the temptation to view themselves as gods—to live by sight instead of faith—was nearly irresistible. But now, with these Christian establishments mostly a memory, there are blessings to count as well as vanishing monuments to mourn. Now Catholic, Orthodox, and the full spectrum of Protestants might learn from each other as fellow believers instead of fearing each other as antagonists with turf to protect. Freed from the burden of American messianism, churches may find it possible to concentrate more on the Source of Life than on the American way of life. Perhaps if believers evaluated the history of recent decades honestly, they could find it easier to concede their need for the Great Physician.

Has North America become a religious wilderness once again? In considerable measure, the historical record suggests that it has. The glories that have been lost were splendid, if never perfect. The world is indeed a poorer place without the vision of the Puritans; the energies of George Whitefield, Phoebe Palmer, and Cardinal Gibbons; the songs of Mahalia Jackson; the discipline of John Strachan; the faithfulness of Egerton Ryerson; and the conscientious persuasion of Bishop Sheen. Who would not regret leaving such glories behind for the wilderness? Perhaps only those who have been asked to listen in the wilderness for a voice to cry and to look in the wilderness for a highway, constructed by God himself, to appear.