How Free are the American Churches? A Clue from Martin Luther King

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In Germany recently a conference of students, including an impressive representation of Marxist-Leninists from The New Left, confronted the American guest speaker with the question: How free are the churches in the USA? One clue to the answer is Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"1 It was written in 1963, five years almost to the day before King's assassination. "Letter" was his reply to white churchmen whose criticism of him typified the "white moderate" churches of America (p. 93).

I.

The thesis here is that "Letter" is a clue to how free the American churches are. Perhaps the better question is not how free they are but how they are free – when they are. In any case, if "Letter" is a clue, then it is more than an admonition, a call merely to such freedom as the churches ought to have but do not. It is a documentary. It is itself an instance of churchly freedom which, though pathetically seldom, is again surfacing in a few rare quarters. The one quarter of the church

which King identifies by name approvingly is “the negro church” (p. 91). Even that designation, restricted though it is, is probably too broad in view of the unfreedom which King’s own black critics are exposing also within “the negro church”. On the other hand, “Letter” pays personal tribute also to individuals from “the white church” (pp. 93,97). But that is not the issue, quite: namely, which American churches are freer than which others. In a way, the freedom which King’s “Letter” documents is a freedom of “the white church” as well as of the black, a freedom not only of the oppressed church but also of the oppressor – though not both in the same way. There is on one hand that church which is already free enough to produce King’s kind of a letter and, on the receiving end, also that church which enjoys such a freeing word at least as a resource within its own, otherwise unfree situation. Put it this way: there is a sector within the American church which, oppressed yet already confident enough to forgive, is on its way toward freeing not only itself but also, here and there, that oppressive church which it suffers. To that much churchly freedom, “Letter” is a clue.

But only a clue, King’s writings, like those of any spokesman for the church, abound in Christian symbols like “God” and “gospel” and “sin” and “brotherhood”, all of them clues which mean much more than even King himself might have consciously intended. “Letter”, in other words, might well say more than King knew. What all it means depends on a long history both fore and aft. Its after-history includes those criticisms it has since brought on itself, for example, from Black Power leaders who find its analysis of human evil was too sanguine or its optimistic “dream” unsupported by adequate grounds. With that important hindsight, which is itself now part of “Letter’s” own subsequent “tradition”, interest turns back once more to the original document, to such loaded terms as King did use to

describe evil and hope: “judgment of God”, “forgiveness”, “Jesus Christ”, and the like. What all could King have meant, or what all should he have meant, by such symbolic clues, all the more so since he (as he would have felt honored to admit) did not originate them? So King’s usage has a fore-history, too, in biblical and church-historical tradition. In light of their historic origins, then, those inherited themes which he might have relayed too ambiguously or too inchoately yet still salvageable, now get their second chance. Only that way, honestly, can we get maximum mileage out of his “Letter” – but not for his sake, who does not need it, but for the church’s, which does. In that way, in fact – namely, by exploiting his language more boldly then he got around to doing – one of the severest objections against King becomes instead a credit to him. He has been faulted for having urged two diametrically contrary things, and both at once: that the black people of America must win their proportionate share of political and social power, but that they may do so by non-violent means. The exposing of this contrariety in King’s position is a profoundly accurate reading of him. And those well-meaning supporters who try to minimize this inherent opposition do the cause small service. Indeed, King himself seemed to betray increasing uneasiness over this dilemma. His real achievement, though, is that he did retain both horns of the dilemma rather than abandon one for the other. If in doing so he was expecting more of his people than he yet had a right to, or, if he was too vague about the secret which held the dilemma together, then the criticism in both cases (as is likely) is valid. Still, the dilemma he managed to sustain is itself a clue to what, for now, is the church’s own best freedom. And enough of that clue survives in King’s “Letter” to warrant pursuing.

II.

King leaves no doubt that “organized religion: in America (p. 96), “the white church”, or simply “the church” – at least that part of it which has proved especially “disappointing” (p. 95) – is in “bondage” (p. 81) and deeply in need of freeing. What in this case does it need most to be freed from? From its “false sense of superiority” (p. 85)? From its complicity with “the oppressor race” (p. 93)? From its acquiescence in “the power structure of the average community” (p. 96)? From its being “more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice” (p. 87)? From its waiting endlessly “for a more convenient season” (p. 87)? From its commitment “to a completely other-world religion” (p. 95)? From every bit of this, no less. But from more than that, and worse: from what King dares to call “the judgment of God…upon the church” (p. 96). And not a judgment of God as usual but “as never before”, so critical now as to have reached a “crisis” (p. 81). How will the church be freed from so drastic a criticism? By the criticism itself? Not *without* the criticism, surely. For it comes on too high authority to be eluded. It will have to be undergone, and “in this generation”, and the word for that is repentance. “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people” (p. 89). Just why repentance will be enough – why that should obviate, for example, the “atonements” and “blood-shedding” being called for by some Black Power religions – King does not make clear, though his christological language suggests clues. At any rate, should the church ignore the criticism, the criticism stands nevertheless, and not merely as some private judgment confined to the divine mind with no consequences for history. On the contrary, this judgment will exact its toll all too publically, sentencing the heedless, oppressive church to the fate of “an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth

century” (p. 96). Those who complain that King went soft on evil ought not be too hasty, though admittedly he was readier than some to trust the judgement was in competent hands.

Yet judgment, no matter how ultimate, will not liberate the church. Then what will? Only that will which supercedes even judgment, repaying oppression with “love” (p. 92). The question is not whether love is what the oppressors have a right to demand. Hardly. Nor is the question whether love is the surest way of gaining concessions from them. It may be, it may not. Anyway the time may already be past for depending upon their concessions. No, the point about love is rather that, unless this guilty church is surpassingly loved, it will be simply incapable of taking the criticism and, still less, of profiting from it – if the criticism is to be unto life and not unto death.

But what authorizes love to trump judgment, especially if the latter is “of God”? The answer for King, of course, is God, the same God, whose judgment is only penultimate to his forgiveness (p. 100). Granted, it is a fair question whether for King such a trumping of mercy over judgment ever really won out historically, say in the resurrection. Of the crucified Jesus “Letter” says merely that he “rose above his environment” (p. 92). By contrast, there is probably more realistic mention of “resurrections” in the idiom of Black Power. Still, dare the church of America really fault the christological obscurities of a King – “who was nurtured in its bosom, who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen” (p. 94) – if, even when it did say the right and orthodox things about Christ, it must not have said them very clearly, considering its record toward Christ’s black brothers? But what is also a matter of record is that some of these same oppressed brothers, the very ones who bear the onerous burden of acting out the divine criticism, are

now in so many words calling over to the rest of the church: not only judgment but, despite and beyond that, “brother” (p. 100). Some have sealed that word with their blood. Evidently they must have some reason for hoping that that word, that last word, will succeed outlastingly.

III.

On the other hand, King’s hope does not rise and fall with, it “can’t wait” for, the larger church. “Even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future” (p. 97). “The future” in this case, of course, is the coming freedom of America’s Negroes. But why is their free future assured so independently of the church? Because, says King, what is “embodied in our echoing demands” is “the eternal will of God” (p. 98). Still, isn’t that the sort of audacious reasoning the church has jealously
reserved for its *own* hopes? What is worse, if it is “God” who is willing black freedom into being, isn’t that the selfsame God who is allegedly threatening the church with judgment? Indeed, it is by his one and the same historical action that both movements seem to coincide, as ships that pass in the night: as “these disinherited children of God” (p. 99) now win their freedom, any church which declines that movement will thereby “lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions” – the loyalty, for instance, of “young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust” (p. 96). What is gain for the one sector, and the hopeful “will of God”, is loss for the other sector, and the “judgment of God”. So if black freedom succeeds even though the church fails, it isn’t that black freedom will not have had a share in the church’s undoing. It will. For then it will be exactly that promising Negro future, which the church will have eschewed, which leaves the church behind. No wonder that some in the church regard that

future with “fear”(p. 100).

The terrible irony here should not be missed. What the coming freedom of America’s Negroes dramatizes is not only the church’s impending failure but also, ironically, the church’s own more hopeful past. For the hope which King holds for black America was once the hope of the American church. The reason this future threatens to pass the church by (many another future she could well do without) is that this was hers, which now she abdicates. If it is “in our echoing demands” that “the eternal will of God” is now “embodied”, that same will was long before embodied in “the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage” (p. 99). From one standpoint, from the standpoint of black self-respect, it may seem servile of King to see his people’s cause as but the continuation of someone’s else’s history – the church’s or white America’s. But from the standpoint of the church, as King well knew, what is here being relinquished and picked up again is “the gospel of freedom” (p. 78), which by definition is ethnically unlimited. When it does suffer limitation, it responds by moving away – as a “Platzregen”, the Reformers said, a local shower – to other places and peoples. The national history of freedom in which the church once had so proud a share is one in which her Negroes also had to share, ironically, by force. But now, though having learned their freedom from below, it is they – and seemingly less and less the larger, white church – who advance “the sacred heritage” (p. 98). Now it is they who make bold to syllogize “the eternal will” as history: “We will reach the goal of freedom…because the goal of America is freedom” and because “our destiny is tied up with America’s destiny” (p. 97). It sounds anachronistic, at least familiar. In them the American church might be meeting itself coming back.

Still, has it ever really been the church’s mission to secure for the oppressed such secular freedoms as “a cup of coffee at a

lunch counter", free access to "an affluent society" or to a "public amusement park" or to a "motel", or the "respected title of 'Mrs.'" (pp. 83-84)? Aren't these after all, as clergymen reminded King, "social issues with which the gospel has no real concern" (p. 95). Ah, but doesn't such a question already betray what King denounces as a "completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between sacred and secular" (p. 95)? Really, it is worse that that. Quite apart from the church's responsibility for the "body" and the "secular", for "the moral law…of God" in society (p. 85), what segregation is attacking is exactly the "gospel". For segregation reduces its victims to "a degenerating sense of 'nobodyness'" (p. 84). And that is the diametric opposite of assuring them they are dear and precious, not only as "souls" but as "bodies" and not somewhere beyond the blue but here and now. If as Paul said, whatever is not done in faith is sin, then that is the faithlessness with which segregation destroys men when it plunges them "into the abyss of despair" (p. 84). Segregation is what Paul called "another gospel", a demonic religion, however secular its means. Nor are its means all that secular, least of all when it is institutionalized in "beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward" (p. 95). Then surely it is fair to ask of such an oppressive institution not just the "social" but the religious question. "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God" (p. 95)? But then neither is it too much to say of those who by bearing the cross have withstood this hostile spirituality, also in its allegedly "secular" realm, that "their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times" (p. 97). Notice, "the gospel". But pray, wasn't that once the mission of the church? Behold the "Platzregen".

IV.

On the other hand, it is only half the truth to pit King against "the church" or even in competition with it, although his own rhetoric might foster that misimpression. To begin with, it is downright false and only thinly disguised racism – by which King himself seems to have been hoodwinked – to say "the church" is unfree merely because "the white church" may be unfree. As if that other sector which King served – always to the end as a "minister of the gospel who loves the church" (p. 94) – were not every bit as much the church!

Indeed, it is in this church for which King had immediate responsibility that some of the traditional churchly "marks" are conspicuous as they are nowhere else in the American religious establishment. For example, here in graphic proportions the church is seen, as Luther would say, "under the dear, holy cross" and as King would say, "deemed worthy to suffer" (p, 96). For another example, here is that mark which Franklin Littell had found wanting in American denominations today, the disciplining of their own membership. Nowadays the term "discipline" sounds harsh and sect-like. But for King and his community it has meant the sort of "self-purification" which the medieval synagogue, the old Benedictine communities and Jesus himself required of a newcomer, not to exclude him but to forewarn him of the sacrifices entailed and to ready him. "Can you drink the cup that I am about to drink," Jesus asked the sons of Zebedee, and cautioned against joining his undertaking without reckoning the costs. King recounts how "we repeatedly asked ourselves: 'Are you able to accept the blows without retaliating? Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail'" (p. 80)? Here are Christians who still remember that in the church the applicant stands to lose money, face, longevity, his own self, and that that may not be, at least immediately, everyone's

cup of tea. King's Black Power critics may be implicitly agreeing with him if what they are saying is that his program of non-violence is not for everyone, at least not until one has gained enough self-respect to be able to give that much of oneself away. In view of what King said about segregation's "degenerating sense of 'nobodyness'", the church should be the last one to expect miracles of faith where unfaith has been sown. King's "self-purification" seems to recognize those human realities as a good church should, by anticipating them compassionately in its discipline.

One of the most churchly characteristics of King's movement is its awareness of the "Brotherhood", a mighty theme also in the black community generally. The dimension of the brotherly is especially essential where overwhelming demands are being made upon "love". And in King's movement they certainly are: the demand to love not only the "neighbor" – the near-by one, like the fellow-black and the sympathetic white – but also the "enemy". But those two dimensions of New Testament love – of the neighbor and of the enemy – are by themselves incomplete, emphasizing only love's object, the one-to-be-loved. What they omit is the one-*by*-whom we are loved, namely the "brother." He was brother to us before we loved him, and it is *because* he was, *that* we love him. Love for the brother, unlike its neighborly and forgiving corollaries, is never spontaneous with the one doing the loving. It is always responsive, reciprocal. The brotherhood loves the new brother into loving back. The brotherhood was there before he arrived and it welcomed him aboard. Without that prior being-loved, his outreach toward neighbor and especially toward the enemy would be quite improbable. Does King's "Brotherhood" provide all that? If not, then the black complaint against him is in place: how can we love the oppressor until we first love ourselves? At any rate there may have been less yearning to reenact messianisms today

had King been clearer about that One from whom the brotherhood proceeds, that “Firstborn among many brothers”. Nevertheless, there is still in King’s tradition of the brotherhood a wondrous potential for correcting the heroic individualism of modern Protestant love-ethics, and for recovering a forgotten secret of the church.

But if Ling’s “church” is marked as so distinctively Christian by the cross it bears, by its discipline and brotherhood, how can King apply the same name “church” almost indiscriminately to such an undefined mass as “organized religion” in America (p. 96)? In fact, for him the American church seems sometimes to be almost synonymous with “America”. It is at that point hardly a “believers church”. King includes under Christian rubrics people who would not include themselves therein. For example, among the “fellow clergymen” whom “Letter” addressed was a rabbi. But he, too, without distinction, is admonished with arguments from the New Testament, with appeals to “Jesus Christ”, and finally is asked to regard King as his “Christian brother” (p. 100). Such inclusiveness occurs even more explicitly where King is addressing not his critics (as in “Letter” he is) but his supporters. That these include “rabbis of the Jewish faith” is to be expected. What is less expected is that for their pains King offers them “the consolation of the words of Jesus, ‘Blessed are ye when men shall revile you…for my sake’”2 King reminds his broad membership of “the unity we have in Christ”: “neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, Negro nor White”.3 But what if some of these, though wanting “unity”, do not want it “in Christ” and in fact do want explicitly to be “Jew” or “Negro” or Black? Isn’t King really serious about the church as Christian?

A better explanation is that for King “church” at this point resembles a national folk church, an American christendom. It includes many who may or may not be believers but who very

decidedly do still participate in the corporate ethos of the church – for example, its public worship or its social action – and as such are important carriers of that churchly ethos. There need be no illusions that the mere doing of these churchly things ("ex opere operato") makes the doer a Christian. But neither is it forgotten that zealous attempts to weed out the tares frequently bruise the wheat as well. One alternative is persistently and articulately to remind those who so share in the church's operations what the unique basis of their common life is. That King does: we "are all one in Christ Jesus".4 Hearing that, the participant can draw the inferences for himself – but then from within the Christian community, not from without. What was said above about King's church discipline seems to have its obverse and its inseparable presupposition in this broadbased national "church". Now King, especially as a Baptist, would probably not have endorsed such medieval mission methods as baptizing barbarian tribes en masse and then christianizing them later. But his approach to "the church" as a national phenomenon may help in the American Church's current predicament over "societal religion".

Accordingly, "the church" with which King identified is not only that cross-bearing, disciplined brotherhood, nor even the church of the giants – John Bunyan and Luther and Augustine and Paul and "the early Christians" – whom King in his idealizing of the tradition often over-rated (pp. 84, 87, 92, 96). No, his "church" embraced no less that very one which is lax, loveless, fearful, segregationist. It is *that* church of which he said, "Yes, I love the church", and added (as if on trial before the churchmen at Worms), "How could I do otherwise" (p. 95)?

True, the capitulations of "organized religion: to the status quo led King to ask whether instead he should look "to the inner, spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true 'ekklesia' and the hope of the world" (pp. 96-97). But he

only asked the question, then reminded himself that also “from the ranks of organized religion” there are emerging some notable witnesses to “the true meaning of the gospel” (p. 97). There is no denying that his first-person plural, “we”, was reserved mostly for his own black people (which is to his everlasting credit both as a black man and as a pastor) but that often he referred to “the church” merely as a third-person “it”. Even then, however, that is never said in the aloof withdrawal of a Salvian or a Kierkegaard or a Spener. For that matter, it should be understandable if some black churchmen will first have to pass through an interim of prophetic withdrawal and retrenchment from the larger church before that church and they will again be ready for one another. But King’s kind “can’t wait”. He had to retain his identity both with the offended and the offender, like a man straddling boats floating apart. He had to include himself also in the “we” of the sinful church. “*We* will have to repent…” (p. 89). “But oh, how we have blemished and scarred that body” – “the church as the Body of Christ” (p. 95).

There, in his appreciation of “the church as the body of Christ”, King’s otherwise vague christology may be least vague and closest to the original. And that would be no wonder. Not that he should be expected to have learned such a doctrine of the church directly from American religion, given its history of sectarianism. Yet even given this very sectarianism and the wretchedness of the church as King was made to see it, by what other love *could* such a church be loved as one body -–except by the kind of “Christ” who alone would have it as his “body”, whose love of it could only be cruciform, sin- bearing, forgiving? That of course, assumes that that church is still loved at all, an assumption King maintained doggedly. And he drew the consequences for his own forgiving and forgiven-ness. From the very churchmen whom “Letter” reproves, King asks finally to be regarded “not as an integrationist or a civil-

rights leader but as a fellow- clergyman and a Christian brother", and stood ready to ask their forgiveness (p. 100) – an act which without a really bold christology sounds downright craven. But that same forgiving love explains why King even so much as bothered to reprove this church, to be disappointed with it and, what is more, to write letters like this explaining his disappointment. "There can be no disappointment where there is no deep love" (p. 95).

V.

Come now an almost hopeless dilemma. It is a dilemma King hoped to cope with by means of his distinctive method, "non-violent direct action". The dilemma is one which characterizes the Christian ethos especially, though it is a dilemma which that ethos cannot afford to be without. What is it? On the one hand, the oppressed – in this case, America's Negroes – can gain their freedom from their oppressors only by standing in criticism upon them, reciprocating the oppression by at least some kind of "pressure" or "tension" (pp. 80,81). In other words, the criticism, whatever the euphemisms, is retributive. It need not return evil for evil. But it most certainly has to "demonstrate" that evil has consequences. Obviously it has consequences for the oppressed. Still, even those consequences may not be obvious to the oppressor if, by the structures of his society, he has successfully segregated himself from the consequences he inflicts. In that case his victims will have to "demonstrate" their sufferings where he can see them. "…W would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community" (p. 80). But in so demonstrating what the consequences of oppression are for the oppressed, these demonstrators now impose those consequences also upon the oppressor, that is, upon his conscience. Of course, such a demonstration imposes also additional

consequences as a “by-product”. In the case of Birmingham, the by-product was a “strong economic withdrawal program” on the part of sympathetic shoppers thus bringing “pressure to bear on the merchants for the needed change” (p. 80). The point is that such “direct action”, however non-violent, is already a form of retribution and a standing criticism upon the oppressor. The time comes finally, if all negotiations are refused and promises are broken, that there is simply “no alternative” except such retributive criticism (80). Nor has the Christian ethos at its best, not even in its apparently antinomian forms, ever blinked this necessity. However that now becomes one pole of a dilemma.

The other pole is this: The oppressor himself – in this case the white segregationist, whether “rabid” or “moderate” – must not be allowed to be alienated, as by such criticism he is almost bound to be, but must rather be restored. That is the Christian bind in which King found himself, although the assumption here is that for him to persist in that bind was an act of freedom. The oppressor is of course under no circumstance to be condoned. That is no longer possible if for no other reason that that the “Zeitgeist”, the present “time-table” of history, will simply not hold still for that any longer (pp. 82-82, 87, 91). But neither will King conclude – as do those “various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation”, who come “perilously close to advocating violence” and “who have absolutely repudiated Christianity” – “that the white man is an incorrigible ‘devil’” (p. 90). The reason King desists from that conclusion is not that he does not understand it. He happens rather to have found a “more excellent way” (p. 90).

If the oppressor is not an “incorrigible devil”, then notice how corrigible he is expected to be. He is not merely to be removed or coerced or even ignored. Such solutions are insufficient because they are essentially reactionary, not sufficiently “extreme” (pp. 90- 92). Instead the oppressor is himself to

become so liberated as to be able to take the criticism rather than begrudge it and, what is more, to grow from it and act upon it.

Come to think of it, the word for that was “repentance”. Or “freedom”. But what possible recourse is available to the oppressed – that is, to American Negroes – to accomplish two such conflicting goals: the recovery of their freedom from their oppressors, and the recovery of their oppressors? The help with this dilemma, says King, came through the church. “I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of non-violence became an integral part of our struggle.” Reference was made above to non-violence as a “method”. It is more than a method, though it is that, too. That is, it is not simply a prudential “love” calculated to prick the oppressor’s conscience and to gain rights without having to fight for them. If King had thought that that method was the only want to win freedom for American Negroes, why was he at the same time convinced that that freedom would come inevitably, with or without the church and, if not by non-violent means, then by other means? More important, if non- violence were only a tactic for the sake of the oppressed (which already is no mere thing) why did King take such pains and so many words to regain the oppressors themselves? One does not have to be naive to accept that – just free and venturesome enough to gain the benefit of the doubt.

If King’s “way of non-violence” was more than a method, what more was it? Why not call it simply by King’s word, a “way”? That term has noble precedent in the early church, where Christians were followers in The Way and where the Fourth Gospel identified that Way personally. Or in still other words, King’s non-violence is not only a method but a *message*. It is meant to perform a kerygmatic function – remember, “the true meaning of the *gospel*” (p. 97) – though in this case the kerygma has to be

acted out, not only verbalized, perhaps because all the good verbalizations of it seemed by now to have been demonized beyond recognition. King was a preacher, a practiced preacher. In his practice non-violence was a *sign* of the gospel.

But if it was, then "non-violence" is a misleading, overly modest description of it. Not only is this way non-violent. Better than that, it is non-retributive. It is possible to be non-violent and still retributive, retaliating in non-violent ways. But in King's "non- violence" there is, beyond that, the implication also of non-retribution. Witness his community's discipline: "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating" (p. 80)? "Without retaliating" – they are not even to reciprocate judgment. Not that there is no judgment for them to act out. There is and they do, retributively and critically. And not that the judgment they dramatize isn't valid. It comes, recall, on the highest authority. But in, with and under the way of judgment is that other "way of non-violence", which is more over the "more excellent way". Why is it that? Suffice it to say, for now, it is what King called "forgiveness" (p. 100). "Non-violence" was The Way of "demonstrating" to the "enemy": "Peace" (p. 100). But retribution and absolution both at once? How can they be reconciled? (Reenter the christological question.)

It was high freedom on the part of King to sustain this Christian dilemma, "pressuring" with retributive criticism to liberate the oppressed and yet trumping that pressure with "non-retaliation" to liberate the oppressor. But that was not all. To tell the truth, King did see non-retribution, forgiveness, "non-violence" also as a *method*. That was, after all, a means to an end for the sake of the oppressed, a deliberate means of persuading the oppressors to change their ways. But it was that only because it was first of all a means of changing the oppressors themselves, of setting them free. But wasn't it a way

of using them? In a way, yes. Not in a way that exploited them, but in a way that any man, once he has enjoyed the gospel and its brotherhood, would only want to be used – if need be, sacrificially.

Each newly gained brother (also in "the white church") King celebrated with the only way appropriate to such a gift: "I am thankful" (pp 93,97) – though apparently never surprised. In apostolic fashion his epistle mentions many of these new witnesses by name and extols their brotherliness (pp. 93, 97, 99). With them presumably the message had succeeded also as a method. For King, it seems, that was simply to be expected. Indeed the one thing he wondered at was that there weren't more of them. The temptation to dispute his hopefulness is almost overwhelming – almost. He must have had vast connections. And fighting on the other side must get harder every day.

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2 M.L.King, Stride Toward Freedom, New York 1958, 187.

3 M.L. King Strength to Love, London 1964, 119.

4 M.L. King Stride Toward Freedom, 187.

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