

The time is ripe

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

In the small lobby of the offices of the Christian Century hang two large mounted posters. Each contains a familiar photograph of a major figure in American Christianity, along with a brief quotation from one of the articles he wrote for the Century. One poster features Reinhold Niebuhr; the other, Martin Luther King Jr.

King contributed to the Century and for a while before his death was one of our editors at large. The quotation that appears in the lobby is from the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” which appeared in the Century of June 12, 1963. King wrote: “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men [today he would add “and women”] willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.”

King chose the Century as the journal to publish the entire letter, which he had written in response to a group of white ministers who asked him to be patient and not push the agenda of equal rights so urgently. The ministers acknowledged that his position was right, but argued that the time was not yet right. Thus King’s point that “the time is always ripe to do right.”

Dean Peerman, who still writes and edits for us, was the staff member who edited the letter for publication in the Century. He still has a copy of the original letter from the Century’s editor, Harold Fey, to King, acknowledging his permission and desire to have the letter published in the magazine.

As we observed King’s birthday recently, I recalled my first encounter with him. He was then pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, and he appeared as the guest preacher at Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago. I had never heard of him before, but I was mesmerized as I listened to him preach. Here was a preacher who combined all the university criteria—he was scholarly, literate, witty—with a passionate commitment to the social, political, economic and behavioral implications of Christian faith. Here was what was missing from my experience of Christian faith—and most especially of the Christian church.

Niebuhr said somewhere that the civil rights movement saved the mainline Protestant church from irrelevance. That was my experience. It had seemed to me that believing in Jesus was a private matter—a view supported by some existentialist thought of the day. I wasn’t sure that the church had anything to do with social and political concerns until I heard King and started to listen to what he was saying and watch what he was doing and to emulate, in a very modest way, what he was advocating.

Martin Luther King Jr. put the Christian faith together for me, and for that, and for the way he wove the dream of equal rights and equal justice into the soul of the culture and the church, I am forever grateful. Every time I come to work at the Century I see his picture, read the quote, nod in his direction and thank God for who he was and what he did.