

“Good News for the Underprivileged,” Summer 1935

Thurman first presented “Good News for the Underprivileged” at the annual convocation on preaching at Boston University in 1935. He had presented an earlier version of the same lecture as early as 1932.¹ A version of the 1935 lecture was published in the summer edition of *Religion and Life*. After reading a draft of the article in January 1935, the journal’s editor, John W. Langdale, wrote Thurman that it was “the noblest expression that I have read from your race. It combines intelligence, self-respect, and magnanimity.”²

Thurman’s theological argument here draws on the historical criticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which often pointed to the differing social statuses of Jesus, raised in relative poverty in the Galilee, and that of Paul, the well-to-do Greek-speaking cosmopolitan from the Diaspora. For many adherents of the Social Gospel, the process of taming the revolutionary message of Jesus into a complacent religion that upheld the status quo began with Paul.³ Thurman also drew on the African American tradition of hostility to Paul because of his condoning of slavery. Thurman recounted that his grandmother, on this account, refused to quote from the Pauline epistles.⁴

In this article, Thurman lays the foundation for his ongoing inquiry into the religion of Jesus. He argues that the “distinguishing mark” between Jesus and Paul is their citizenship. While both were members of a “captive” Jewish community, Paul’s ability to appeal to his Roman citizenship is ground for suspicion. On the other hand, Jesus was a poor Jew whose message to those of similar social status is only enhanced by his low social position.⁵

Thurman contends that in its “social genesis,” Christianity was a “technique of survival for a disinherited minority.” The religion of Jesus, he claims, solves the main problem facing oppressed minorities—a sense of fear stemming from low “self-estimate.” But the religion of Jesus and religion in general restore one’s self-esteem by placing one squarely in the family of God, therefore giving one a sense of belonging in a natural system that supersedes principalities.

“Good News for the Underprivileged” is a critical organ in the Thurman corpus for several reasons. First, it establishes Thurman’s belief that “only the underprivileged man may bring the message to the underprivileged.” Furthermore, it broaches the question as to the appropriate response of an oppressed community to violence, placing Thurman in the traditions of nonviolence and redemptive love. While recognizing the initial role of deception as a weapon of the weak, he challenges its ultimate usefulness, because it requires a level of insincerity that is antithetical to the message of Jesus.

Thurman continued to draw on the subject of “Good News for the Underprivileged” in his sermons and lectures, and this was a staple of his talks in India.⁶ His reflections on this theme culminated in his 1948 lecture series on the same subject—as the Mary L. Smith Memorial Lectures at Samuel Houston College, Austin, Texas. These lectures were published the following year as *Jesus and the Disinherited*, arguably Thurman’s most influential work.

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There is no more searching question that the individual Christian should ask himself than this: What is the message, the good news, that Christianity has to give to the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed? In seeking

an answer certain basic historical facts must be taken into account. First, Christianity is an historical faith, the result of a movement that was started in time, by an individual located in history. Setting aside for the moment all metaphysical and theological considerations, simply stated, this individual was a Jew. That mere fact is arresting. Did it simply happen that as a result of some accidental collocation of atoms, this human being came into existence so conditioned and organized within himself that he was a perfect instrument for the embodiment of a set of ideals of such alarming potency that they were capable of changing the calendar, redirecting the thought of the world, and placing a new sense of the rhythm of life in a weary nerve-broken civilization? Or was there something basic in the great womb of the people out of which he sprang that made of him the logical funding of a long development of race experience, ethical in quality and spiritual in tone? Doubtless there is widespread agreement with the latter position.

He was a poor Jew—so poor that his family could not afford a lamb for the birth presentation to the Lord, but had to secure doves instead (Leviticus 12:8). Is it too daring to suggest that in his poverty he was the symbol of the masses of men so that he could truly be Son of Man more naturally and accurately than if he had been a rich Jew?

As a poor Jew, Jesus was a member of a minority race, underprivileged and to a great degree disinherited. The Jews were not citizens of the Roman Empire and hence were denied the rights and privileges such citizenship guaranteed. They were a captive group, but not enslaved.

There were exceptions. The first great creative interpreter of the Christian religion was a Jew, but a Roman citizen. This fact is instructive in enabling us to understand the psychology of this flaming, mystic tentmaker with his amazing enthusiasm. It is demanding too much of human nature to expect that a man who was by blood and ties deeper than blood—religion—a member of a despised group, could overcome that fact and keep it from registering in the very ground of his underlying interpretation of the meaning of existence. No matter where Paul happened to be located within the boundaries of the, then all inclusive, Roman Empire, he could never escape the consciousness of his citizenship. Whenever he was being beaten by a mere Roman soldier, doubtless hired to be the instrument of discipline and imperialism of the Empire, he knew that in the name of the Emperor he could demand the rights of citizenship of the Empire. He could appeal to Caesar in his own right and be heard. It is to his great credit and a decided tribute to the “fragrance of Christ,” of which he called himself the essence,⁷ that he did not resort to this more frequently. But there it stands, a distinguishing mark setting him off from his group in no uncertain fashion. Do we wonder then that he could say: “Every subject must obey the government authorities, for no authority exists apart from God, the existing authorities have been constituted of God, hence any one who resists authority is opposing the divine order, and the opposition will bring judgment on themselves. . . . If you want to avoid being alarmed at the government authorities lead an honest life, and you will be commended for it; the magistrate is God’s servant for your benefit. . . . You must be obedient, therefore, not only to avoid the divine vengeance but as a matter of conscience, for the same reason that you pay taxes. Since magistrates are God’s offering bent upon the maintenance of order and authority” (Romans 13).⁸ Or again: “Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters, saith the Lord, with reverence and trembling, with singleness of heart, as to Christ himself” (Ephesians 6:5). Other familiar references could be quoted. Why Paul could feel this way is quite clear, when we remember that he was a Jew—yes, but a free Jew. But Jesus was not a free Jew. If a Roman soldier kicked Jesus into a Galilean ravine, it was merely a Jew in the ravine. He could not appeal to Caesar. Jesus was compelled to expand the boundaries of his citizenship out beyond the paltry political limitations of a passing Empire, and establish himself as a Lord of Life, the Son of God, who caused his sun to shine upon Roman and Jew, free and bond. The implications of his insight had to be worked out on a narrow stage in the agonizing realities of the struggle of his people against an over-arching mighty power—the Roman Empire. *Christianity, in its social genesis, seems to me to have been a technique of survival for a disinherited minority.*

The meaning of his public commitment in the little Nazareth synagogue, when he felt himself quickened into dedication by the liquid words of the prophet of Deutero-Isaiah, is much to the point:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me:

For he has consecrated me to preach the gospel to the poor,

He has sent me to proclaim release for captives

And recovery of sight for the blind, to set free the oppressed, To proclaim the Lord's year of favor.

(Moffatt.)⁹

What, then, is the gospel that this underprivileged One would proclaim to the poor and the disinherited? The first demand it makes is that fear should be uprooted and destroyed, so that the genuine power of the dominant group may not be magnified or emphasized. Fear is the lean, hungry hound of hell that rarely ever leaves the track of the dispossessed.

The dispossessed are a minority, sometimes a minority as to numbers, always a minority as to economic power and political control. They happen occasionally to be the balance of power, but even then, it is a matter of playing one element of the powerful over against the other. Because of the insecure political and economic position of the dispossessed, they are least able to protect themselves against violence and coercion on the part of the powerful. The fear of death is ever present. Men with healthy minds and fairly adequate philosophies do not fear death as an orderly process in the scheme of life. But it is exceedingly difficult for individuals to accommodate themselves to cataclysmic death at the hands of other men, not nature, without associating it with some lofty ideal or great cause. This is the lot of the dispossessed. Without a moment's notice any one of them may be falsely accused, tried, sentenced without adequate defense and certainly without hope of justice. This is true because the dispossessed man is without political and economic status as a psychological *fact*, whatever the idea of the state may specify to the contrary.

Fear becomes, therefore, a safety valve which provides for a release of certain tensions that will ordinarily be released in physical resistance. Physical resistance is almost always suicidal, because of a basic lack in the tools of violence and the numbers to use them. Fear is a natural defense because it acts as a constant check on the activities which may result in clashes and subsequent reprisals. Psychologically, it makes certain costly errors impossible for the individual and thereby becomes a form of normal insurance against violence. But it disorganizes the individual from within. It strikes continually at the basic ground of his self-estimate, and by so doing makes it impossible for him to live creatively and to function effectively even within the zones of agreement.

Religion undertakes to meet this situation in the life of the dispossessed by seeking to establish for the individual a transcending basis of security which locates its center in the very nature of life. Stated in conventional religious terminology, it assures the individual that he is a child of God. This faith, this confidence, this affirmation has a profound effect upon the individual's self-estimate. It assures him of a basic status that his environment cannot quite undermine. "Fear not, those who can kill the body, but rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body,"¹⁰ says Jesus. To say that this is merely a defense mechanism is not to render it invalid. Granted that it may be, although I do not think so, the practical results of such a conception are rich and redemptive.

This kind of self-estimate makes for an inner-togetherness, carrying within it the moral obligation to keep itself intact. It gives to the inner life a regulation that is not conditioned by external forces. In its most intensified form it makes of men martyrs and saints. Operating on the lower reaches of experience, it gives to them a wholeness and a simple but terrible security that renders fear of persons and circumstances ridiculous.

Again, this kind of relaxation at the center of life, growing out of a healthy self-estimate, gives to the individual an objectivity and detachment which enable him to seek fresh and unsuspecting ways for defeating his environment. "Behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves, you must be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves."¹¹ Often there are things on the horizon that point logically to a transformation of society, especially for the underprivileged, but he cannot co-operate with them because he is spiritually and intellectually confused. He mistakes fear for caution and caution for fear. Now, if his mind is free and his spirit unchained, he can work intelligently and courageously for a new day. Yes, with great calmness and relaxation, as sons of God, the underprivileged may fling their defiance into the teeth of circumstances as they work out their salvation with fear and trembling *as to God*.

Religion also insists upon basic sincerity and genuineness as to attitude and character. Let your words be yes and no; you must be clear and transparent, and of no harm to any one; have your motive so single that your purpose is clear and distinct—such are the demands of religion.

This emphasis in Christianity creates the most difficult problem for the weak. It is even more difficult than the injunction to love your enemies. This is true because it cuts the nerve of the most powerful defense that the weak have against the strong—deception. In the world of nature, the weak survive because in the regular process of natural selection ways of deceiving the enemy have been determined upon and developed. Among some lower animals and birds the techniques are quite uncanny. The humble cuttlefish is supplied with a tiny bag of sepia fluid, and when beset by an enemy he releases the fluid into the water, making it to turn murky and cloudy. Under the cover of this smoke screen he disappears, to the utter confusion of his enemy.

Among many American Negroes, self-deception has been developed into an intricate subtle defense mechanism. This deception is often worked out with deliberate unerring calculation. A classic example is to be found in the spiritual, "All God's Chillun." The slave heard his master's minister talk about heaven as the final abode of those who had lived the good life. Naturally, the terror of his present existence made him seek early to become a candidate for a joyous tomorrow, under a very different order of existence. Knowing how hard and fast the lines were drawn between him and his master in this world, he decided that there must be two heavens; but no, for there is but one God. Then an insight occurred to him. While on earth, his master was having his heaven; when he died, he would have his hell. The slave was having his hell now; when he died, he would have his heaven. As he worked the next day chopping cotton, he sang to his fellow-slave: "I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's chillun got shoes (pointing to the rest of the slaves); when we get to heaven we're goin' to put on our shoes, and shout all over God's heaven. (No lines, no slave row there.) But everybody talkin' bout heaven (pointing to the big house where the master lives) ain't goin' there."¹²

There are three possible solutions to the dilemma of genuineness as the underprivileged man faces it. First, deliberate deception and a naive confidence that God will understand the tight place in which the individual is caught and be merciful. It is needless to point out what such a course may do to the very foundation of moral values. Traffic along this avenue leads to the quicksand of complete moral breakdown and ineffectiveness. The second possibility is an open frankness and honesty of life projecting itself in a world-society built upon subterfuge and deceit. It is the way that is taken by the rare spirit in response to the highest demands of his nature without regard to consequences; for the average individual completely outside of the range of his powers as yet developed. It will mean stretching himself out of shape for the sake of ends that are neither clear nor valid. The third means accepting an attitude of compromise. The word is a bad one. No man can live in a society of which he does not approve without some measure of compromise. The good man is one who often with studied reflection seeks to reduce steadily to a vanishing point the areas of compromise within and without—while the bad man is one who often deliberately increases such an area without and within. The third attitude stated categorically is, absoluteness as to the ideal; compromise in achievement. This means that the battle must be fought to the limit of one's power in areas not fundamental to one's self-estimate and integrity. A line must be

drawn beyond which the underprivileged man cannot go in compromising. Religion, with its cardinal virtue, sincerity, inspires the individual to become increasingly aware of, and sensitive to, the far-reaching significance of many of his simplest deeds, making it possible for him to act, in time, as though his deeds were of the very essence of the eternal. This type of action inspires courage and makes for genuineness at increasingly critical points. He is made to know that out of the heart are the issues of life and that life is its own restraint. With an insight overmastering and transcending, he becomes spiritually and practically convinced that *vengeance belongeth to God*. It becomes clear to him that there are some things in life that are worse than death.

The third demand that religion makes upon the underprivileged is that they must absorb violence directed against them by the exercise of love. No demand has been more completely misused. The keenest discrimination is quite necessary in the exercise of this prerogative of the spirit. It belongs in the same category as grace, the outpouring of unasked for and unobligated kindness without chartering it on the basis of objective merit. For the underprivileged man this often seems to mean cowardice and treason to his own highest group and personal interest. This particular emphasis of Christianity has many times been used by the exploiters of the weak to keep them submissive and subservient. For the man of power to tell the powerless to love is like the Zulu adage which says: "Full belly child says to empty belly child, be of good cheer!"¹³

In examining the basic roots of the concept there are revealed three elements which are fundamental. Love always implies genuine courage. It is built upon an assumption of individual spiritual freedom that knows not the limitations of objective worthiness and merit. It means acting contrary to the logical demands of objective worthiness and character—hence the exercise of a kind of bold power, vast and overwhelming!

It means the exercise of a discriminatory understanding which is based upon the inherent worth of the other, unpredictable in terms of external achievement. It says, meet people where they are and treat them as if they were where they ought to be. Here we are dealing with something more than the merely formal and discursive, rational demand. It is the functioning of a way of knowing that Paul aptly describes as "having a sense of what is vital."¹⁴ Love of this sort places a crown over the head of another who is always trying to grow tall enough to wear it. In religion's profoundest moments it ascribes to God this complete prerogative.

It widens the foundations of life so that one's concept of self increasingly includes a larger number of other individual units of life. This implies the dramatic exercise of simple, direct, thoroughgoing imaginativeness rooted in an experience of life as one totality. Years ago, I encountered this quotation: "The statement, 'know thyself,' has been taken more mystically from the statement, 'Thou hast seen thy brother, thou hast seen thy God.'"¹⁵

In this third demand religion gives to the underprivileged man no corner for individual hatred and isolation. In complete confidence it sends him forth to meet the enemy upon the highway; to embrace him as himself, understanding his limitations and using to the limit such discipline upon him as he has discovered to be helpful in releasing and purifying his own spirit.

Only the underprivileged man may bring the message to the underprivileged. No other can without the penalty of the Pharisee. Jesus, the underprivileged One of Palestine, speaks his words of power and redemption across the ages to all the disinherited:

Come to me, all who are laboring and burdened,
And I will refresh you.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find your souls refreshed;
My yoke is kindly and my burden light.¹⁶

In 1932, Thurman had spoken on “The Kinds of Religion the Negro Needs in Times like These” in Atlanta. An article in the *Atlanta World* recounted the speech: “The speaker called attention to the fact that the religion espoused by the ‘lowly Nazarene’ [unlikely to be a phrase Thurman used] got much of its basic significance for underprivileged people from the fact that its exponent was a member of a despised minority group. It therefore becomes significantly the spiritual survival economy of a minority group before it became a world religion.” “27 Club Forum Draws Mammoth Crowd in Spite of Rain; Thurman Speaks,” *Atlanta World*, 24 February 1932.

From John W. Langdale, 21 January 1935, HTC-MBU: Box 11.

Notably Walter Rauschenbusch depicts Paul as a “social conservative” and the determined opponent of the “radical social spirit” of the Palestinian followers of Jesus. Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907; repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 102, 99.

HT, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 30.

See Thurman’s argument in “A ‘Native Son’ Speaks,” printed in volume 2 of this series, which makes a similar use of citizenship as a category of political and spiritual analysis by contrasting blacks and whites in America rather than the religion of Jesus and Paul.

See “Why Negroes Are Christians,” *Times of Ceylon*, 27 October 1935.

2 Cor. 2:15.

The complete citation is Rom. 13:1–6.

Luke 4:18–19.

Matt. 10:28. Thurman omits the reference to hell at the end of this verse “destroy both body and soul in hell.” A slightly different wording of this text appears in Luke 12:5.

Luke 9:3.

This discussion draws on Thurman's similar analysis of the same spiritual in "The Message of the Spirituals," October 1928, printed in the current volume.

This is one of Thurman's favorite proverbs. See also his use of it in "The Task of the Negro Ministry," October 1928, and "'Relaxation' and Race Conflict," 1929, printed in the current volume.

Phil. 1:9–10.

This is close to John 4:20, "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen."

Matt. 11:29–30.

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