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Letter from Birmingham Jail

BY MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Foreword by
Andrew Young and Robert Franklin



THE TRINITY FORUM READING
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Foreword

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. was arrested and jailed several times for civil disobedience. But on only one occasion did he write a letter to explain the purpose of his incarceration. At the time, King couldn't have known how his eloquent and passionate treatise on justice and non-violent resistance would become an intellectual and moral explanation for the entire Civil Rights Movement.

“Letter from Birmingham Jail” is part of a distinguished genre of prison writings that have earned a timeless, classic status by virtue of their intellectual clarity, substance, and moral urgency. King's letter follows in the tradition of the great biblical writer and apostle Paul, arrested for preaching the Christian gospel; the sixth-century philosopher Boethius, who wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* before his execution for treason; Miguel de Cervantes, who began writing *Don Quixote* while in a debtor's prison; John Bunyan, who drafted *Pilgrim's Progress* while incarcerated for unauthorized preaching; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and pastor imprisoned for plotting the assassination of Adolf Hitler whose *Letters and Papers from Prison* were printed posthumously; and Mohandas Gandhi, whose autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, was partially written from prison. This long list doesn't include memorable works by other former prisoners Sir Walter Raleigh, Niccolo Machiavelli, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Malcolm X.

Church historian Martin E. Marty argued that if the New Testament canon were opened, King's letter would be a candidate for addition. The letter's themes of compassion, timely action, justice, and courage retain their relevance for civic life today. Exploring the letter's context and history will help us understand how King viewed these concepts and why they remain compelling.

The Letter's Social and Economic Context

In 1963, Birmingham—like other southern cities and towns—was divided along the color line. White citizens enjoyed the rights guaranteed by the Constitution while black citizens were denied equal exercise of many of those rights. Simple things like riding the bus, eating at a lunch counter, or renting a hotel room were rigidly segregated, with rules viciously enforced by local police. The social and legal restrictions took on a psychological dimension as black people suffered daily assaults on their personal dignity. For example, their inferior status was reinforced by ubiquitous signs that read “Whites only” or “Negroes only.”

Birmingham's business and political leaders maintained and benefited from this system of apartheid as long as local thought leaders like ministers and journalists justified and legitimized it. Business leaders generally did not question or oppose segregation as long as business was brisk and profits were flowing. Black unemployment was double that of whites, and black workers were largely limited to manual labor in the local industries. Meanwhile, Birmingham's economy was rapidly shifting from providing blue collar to white collar jobs, most of which blacks could not hold. Economic pressures were mounting for those at the bottom of the income ladder. And, as more black military veterans took advantage of GI Bill benefits, the living standard for middle class blacks was rising, raising the expectations of their neighbors.

In addition to the support of local thought leaders, the system of segregation required the acquiescence and cooperation of those who were subject to discrimination. Black citizens with jobs often hesitated to speak up for fear of retaliation from employers. When Birmingham's

black leaders asked outside organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and leaders like King for help, they risked further retaliation from the police and vigilante groups for their resistance to the status quo. Having less to lose, Birmingham's black college students became a ready and willing supply of protesters to fill the city's jail cells.

A new set of marches began just after Christmas 1962, and they were supposed to extend to Easter. Protests continued in early March, 1963; however, the organizers changed their plans to avoid interference with a run-off election for mayor slated for early April. One of the candidates for mayor was Birmingham's Commissioner of Public Safety, Bull Connor. He had a reputation as a quick-tempered man who was likely to overreact to any resistance.

Just days before Easter weekend, King was invited to Birmingham by a courageous local pastor, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. Shuttlesworth was regarded as the most visible local activist and was known for leading protests. Over the years he was repeatedly beaten and his home bombed. But the media never focused on his situation. Andrew Young—a confidant and aide to King—remembers that King was not anxious to go to Birmingham. King knew that Bull Connor might have him killed, but he went because Shuttlesworth pleaded with him to come. “Whenever King went to assist others, he was putting his life on the line, and he would bring the national media with him,” Young recalls. Media attention on Birmingham is precisely what Shuttlesworth wanted. At the same time, King and his advisors recognized the opportunity for staging another nonviolent street drama where the forces of reason and good could be juxtaposed with the forces of prejudice and social evil.

In April, the stage was set for a showdown in Birmingham. Bull Connor lost the mayoral election and remained Commissioner of Public Safety. The nonviolent protest marches in early March had taken place during a busy season for local businesses. Black citizens continued a boycott begun weeks earlier and refused to patronize local stores. When King arrived, some local friends who had offered their homes as collateral to support bail bonds pleaded with him not to protest and be jailed. They were heeding the threats to their homes and livelihoods. King listened

politely and disregarded their advice. After all, he was there risking his life to improve conditions for them and future generations. Without a word, he departed the meeting prepared to be arrested for violating a law that prevented unauthorized parades.

Drafting the Letter

On April 12, Good Friday, King went to jail. The day after his arrest, eight influential white clergymen published an article criticizing his protests and condemning his actions as “unwise and untimely.” He had been jailed many times in the past and had never attempted to respond as he did in his Birmingham letter. We don't know why, but King felt compelled to answer his critics this time. He usually fasted while in jail, and in Birmingham he wrote steadily for 25 to 30 hours. He was usually allowed to bring books and writing materials, but this time he was not permitted to bring any of these. On this occasion, King could draw only on the deep reservoir of his mind, memory, and spirit to compose his most eloquent moral argument.

King began drafting his response on pieces of toilet paper and in the margins of the newspapers brought to him by one of his attorneys, Clarence Jones. Jones and the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker smuggled the drafts out, had them typed each evening, and then smuggled them back in for his editing. Andrew Young recalls that a 17-year-old high school girl typed King's first printed drafts but discarded the scraps of paper after each session. As she translated and typed, she expressed her frustration with King's poor penmanship, noting candidly, “Dr. King can speak but he sure can't write.”

Soon, the Quakers published a version of the letter. Young says, “It began to turn the world around” as various organizations published it, spreading its message far beyond anyone's imagination. About the same time the letter appeared, Bull Connor began to turn the fire hoses and vicious dogs on nonviolent protestors, and images from Birmingham captured the attention of a global television audience. Young observes that had King written the letter from his office, sitting at his desk, no one

would have noticed it. The force of his logic and rhetoric become more penetrating when readers learned the location and occasion of the letter's composition, as the prison cell transformed an otherwise thoughtful essay into a lofty, ethical treatise for the ages.

When the editors of *The Christian Century* prepared to publish it, they observed:

“Believing that the document expresses, better than any other we have seen, the quality of mind and spirit which informs the most important movement for integration in the south, we resolved to publish it in full. ... Although originally written as a reply to eight clergymen who had protested to Dr. King that he was disturbing the peace of Birmingham, the letter speaks to us all concerning a crisis that involves us all. We publish it as a contribution to justice in race relations and in the faith that it will help heal a most grievous wound which this nation is inflicting upon herself.”

The Letter's Enduring Themes

Echoing the belief that this letter “speaks to us all,” let us consider four of the themes that King felt compelled to address and ponder their relevance for our lives and our times. Each theme is introduced by a related quotation.

“Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

First, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” speaks of *human interdependence and the power of compassion*. The letter explores our connections to other people, regardless of geography. Although a native of Atlanta, King was in Birmingham because injustice was there and because he was connected to the many people who suffered under the cruel system of segregation.

More profoundly, King also understood himself to be connected to the very critics who preferred him to leave. He addressed them as friends and fellow leaders of the faith community. Part of the genius of his leadership was how he balanced confrontation with negotiation, never dehumanizing his opponents. He saw them to be temporary opponents susceptible to change and redemption, not permanent enemies. This quality of hopeful, reconciling, and redemptive leadership is often missing in our public life today.

Also, King's commitment to ecumenical and interfaith collaboration is well documented. He believed that the movement for racial justice was not a black movement but a human movement that required the entire human family's support for its moral authority. His own life modeled a liberating openness to others and to strangers. King was a Christian who was deeply influenced by a Hindu, Gandhi. He was a proud African American who celebrated the beauty and ageless wisdom he found in Jewish culture, faith, and his friend Rabbi Abraham Heschel. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh was an intellectual conversation partner who urged King to publicly oppose the war and whom King nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. As these relationships demonstrate, King's catholic intellect was enriched by a wide variety of people and cultures.

King invites each of us to reflect on our ability to imagine and express interdependence and solidarity with those who are different and especially with those who experience disadvantages. Our compassion is a mark of moral maturity.

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late.”

~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

The second theme in King's letter is *zeitgeist* and the fierce “urgency of now.” He was fond of the German word “zeitgeist,” translated as the “spirit of the times.” He interpreted the events unfolding in the southern

United States during the 1950s and 1960s as part of an uncoordinated global movement for democracy and justice. More recently, we have witnessed the Arab Spring, which unleashed forces and yearnings that continue to reverberate throughout the Middle East and North Africa. King challenges us to be discerning of the times in which we live. This requires that we do more than read news reports. It requires a deeper look and careful listening for a new reality that may be seeking to break in, to invade and transform the mundane status quo. In King's time, the new reality was that white and black citizens could live together in harmony. In our time, the Arab Spring challenges us to support others' aspirations for human rights, individual freedom, and honest government.

In Birmingham, King acted with conviction and urgency. He recognized the opportunity for timely, nonviolent protests. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail" he warns us of failing to assist the arrival of the true and good in life. From time to time, have we not all felt that we could and should have spoken or acted in some urgent manner but failed? Our hesitation can have consequences for our personal relationships and for society.

"An unjust law is no law at all."

~ St. Augustine

A third theme that is relevant for the challenges we face today is the need to *evaluate the law and pursue justice*. King urges us to consider the difference between behavior that is legal or permissible and behavior that is morally higher than what the law can require of us. For example, law cannot require us to sacrifice our lives to save the life of another. That is why we esteem such behavior as heroic and morally transcendent. Some individuals use loopholes in the law to their advantage but such action rarely impresses us as ethical or morally appropriate.

King believed that law could ennoble humans by inspiring us to act not only according to the letter of the law but according to the spirit of the law—the underlying moral intent capable of unleashing the "better angels of our nature." The good society requires more than law-abiding

citizens. It depends upon people who love neighbor and enemy—people who wish to transform lives by sharing and giving more than they are obligated to do. Harvard psychologist Erik Erikson referred to older adults who devote their lives to nurturing the next generation as “generative people.” King calls us all to become generative.

King challenged his critics not to condemn his nonviolent resistance simply because it was considered illegal. He invited them to reflect more profoundly on the foundations of law and what it is that gives law its legitimacy. As moral agents we are bound to observe and obey just laws. King introduces a new question into our efforts to evaluate law and policy, namely, what is its impact on the human personality? Laws that do not liberate, enable humans to fully develop their inner potential, and inspire goodness are flawed and stand in need of revision. Laws that allow or encourage self-centeredness and exploitation of fellow human beings are immoral and should be challenged.

“Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point.”

~ C.S. Lewis

Finally, King’s letter explores what it means to have *the courage born of faith*. The person of faith possesses a reservoir of courage to draw upon as he or she walks in the power of faith. King had to believe this as he urged innocent children and adults to protest nonviolently in the presence of often vicious opponents. He told those bold protestors that “unearned suffering is redemptive.” As he asserted a spiritual truth that defied worldly logic, King urged protestors to behave as if the universe was structured to support it.

The Morehouse College Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection includes over 14,000 pieces of King’s handwritten and typed speeches, sermons, and correspondence. In one of those sermons titled, “Transformed Nonconformists,” King declared, “This hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists. Saving our world from pending doom will come not from the actions of a conforming majority, but from

the creative maladjustment of a transformed minority.” One imagines that King was referring again to the courage that is available to those who stand for justice, righteousness, and goodness. This courage may not be realized or fully present before we act. It appears after we make the choice and initiate redemptive action.

King's “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is an impatient essay that demands a response. Do not read it unless you are prepared to think more deeply about where you stand on the great questions of the day. The letter prompts us to engage the challenges of our time with compassion, discernment, and courage. As the editors of *The Christian Century* remind us, “the letter speaks to us all concerning a crisis that involves us all.”

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AMBASSADOR ANDREW YOUNG is a founding principal and Co-Chairman of GoodWorks International. He served two terms as Mayor of Atlanta, was named U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations by President Jimmy Carter, and served three terms in the U.S. Congress. He is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and was a trusted aide to Dr. King during the Civil Rights Movement.

Birmingham City Jail

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. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine goodwill 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—one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Whenever necessary and possible we share staff, educational, and financial resources with our affiliates. 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 and when the hour came we lived up to our promises. So I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were

invited here. I am here because I have basic organizational ties here. Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home town, and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country.



You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being. I am sure that each of you would want to go beyond the superficial social analyst who looks merely at effects, and does not grapple with underlying causes. I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time, but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative.

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. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this 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 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 Rev. 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 of 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 a process of self-purification. We started having workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, “Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?” “Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?”

We decided to set our direct-action program around the Easter season, realizing that with the exception of Christmas, this was the largest shopping period of the year. Knowing that a strong economic withdrawal program would be the by-product of direct action, we felt that this was

the best time to bring pressure on the merchants for the needed changes. Then it occurred to us that the March election was ahead, and so we speedily decided to postpone action until after election day. When we discovered that Mr. Connor was in the run-off, we decided again to postpone action so that the demonstrations could not be used to cloud the issues. At this time we agreed to begin our nonviolent witness the day after the run-off.

This reveals that we did not move irresponsibly into direct action. We too wanted to see Mr. Connor defeated; so we went through postponement after postponement to aid in this community need. After this we felt that direct action could be delayed no longer.

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. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. I just referred to the creation of tension as a part of the work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension. I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. So the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. We, therefore, concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in the tragic attempt to live in monologue rather than dialogue.



One of the basic points in your statement is that our acts are untimely. Some have asked, "Why didn't you give the new administration time to act?" The only answer that I can give to this inquiry is that the new administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one before it acts. We will be sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Mr. Boutwell will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is much more articulate and gentle than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists dedicated to the task of maintaining the status quo. The hope I see in Mr. Boutwell is that he will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this without pressure from the devotees of civil rights. My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined 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 voluntarily 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 jet-like 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 air-tight 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 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 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 "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.



You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: There are just laws and there are unjust laws. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all."

Now what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. To use the words of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship, and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. So segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said

that sin is separation. Isn't segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court because it is morally right, and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong.

Let us turn to a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

Let me give another explanation. An unjust law is a code inflicted upon a minority which that minority had no part in enacting or creating because they did not have the unhampered right to vote. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up the segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout the state of Alabama all types of conniving methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters and there are some counties without a single Negro registered to vote despite the fact that the Negro constitutes a majority of the population. Can any law set up in such a state be considered democratically structured?

These are just a few examples of unjust and just laws. There are some instances when a law is just on its face but unjust in its application. For instance, I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit. Now there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust.

I hope you can see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law as the rabid segregationist would do. This would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do it openly, lovingly (not hatefully as the white mothers did in New Orleans when they were seen on television screaming "nigger, nigger, nigger") and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts

the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law.

Of course there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was seen sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher moral law was involved. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience.

We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was “legal” and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was “illegal.” It was “illegal” to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Germany. But I am sure that, if I had lived in Germany during that time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers even though it was illegal. If I lived in a communist country today where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I believe I would openly advocate disobeying these anti-religious laws.



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 Negroes’ great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s “Counciler” 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 paternalistically 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.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and that when they fail to do this they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is merely a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, where the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substance-filled positive peace, where all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you asserted that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But can this assertion be logically made? Isn't this like condemning the robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical delvings precipitated the misguided popular mind to make him drink the hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because His unique God consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to His will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see, as federal courts have consistently affirmed, that it is immoral to urge an individual to withdraw his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights

because the quest precipitates violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time. I received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas which said: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but is it possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry? It has taken Christianity almost 2,000 years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men 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, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.



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 the 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 of a few Negroes in the middle class who, because of a degree of academic and economic security, and because at points they profit by 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.”

I have tried to stand between these two forces saying that we need not follow the “do-nothingism” of the complacent or the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. There is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I’m grateful to God that, through the Negro church, the dimension of nonviolence entered our struggle. If this philosophy had not emerged I am convinced that by now many streets of the South would be flowing with floods of blood. And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss us as “rabble rousers” and “outside agitators”—those of us who are working through the channels of nonviolent direct action—and refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes, out of frustration and despair, will seek solace and security in black-nationalist ideologies, a development that will lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare.

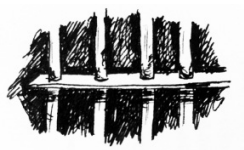
Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come. This is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom; something without has reminded him that he can gain it. Consciously and unconsciously, he has been swept in by what the Germans call the

Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa, and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, he is moving with a sense of cosmic urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. Recognizing this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand public demonstrations. 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. Now this approach is being dismissed as extremist. I must admit that I was initially disappointed in being so categorized.

But as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love? "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice—"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ—"I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist—"Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God." Was not John Bunyan an extremist—"I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist—"This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for the cause of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell

below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness, and thereby rose above His environment. So, after all, maybe the South, the nation, and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this. Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent, and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still all too small in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some like Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden, and James Dabbs have written about our struggle in eloquent, prophetic, and understanding terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They have languished in filthy, roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of angry policemen who see them as “dirty nigger lovers.” They, unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful “action” antidotes to combat the disease of segregation.



Let me rush on to mention my other disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white Church and its leadership. Of course there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some significant stands on this issue. I commend you, Rev. Stallings, for your Christian stand on this past Sunday, in welcoming Negroes to your worship service on a non-segregated basis. I

commend the Catholic leaders of this state for integrating Spring Hill College several years ago.

But despite these notable exceptions I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the Church. I do not say that as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the Church. I say it as a minister of the gospel, who loves the Church; 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.

I had the strange feeling when I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery several years ago that we would have the support of the white Church. I felt that the white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South would be some of our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained glass windows.

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this 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.

So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.

I have travelled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi, and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her beautiful churches with their spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: "Who worships here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave the clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when tired, bruised, and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the Church; I love her sacred walls. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson, and the great-grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the Church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformist.



There was a time when the Church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed

worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the Church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” But they went on with the conviction that they were “a colony of heaven” and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be “astronomically intimidated.” They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.

Things are different now. The contemporary Church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the Church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the Church’s silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the Church as never before. If the Church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early Church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. I am meeting young people every day whose disappointment with the Church has risen to outright disgust.

Maybe again I have been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Maybe I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual Church, the church within the Church, as the true ecclesia and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone through the highways of the South on torturous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been kicked out of their churches and lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have gone with the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. These men have been the leaven in the

lump of the race. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.

I hope the Church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the Church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are presently misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, we were here. For more than two centuries our foreparents labored in this country without wages; they made cotton “king”; and they built the homes of their masters in the midst of brutal injustice and shameful humiliation—and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.



I must close now. But before closing I am impelled to mention one other point in your statement that troubled me profoundly. You warmly commend the Birmingham police force for keeping “order” and “preventing violence.” I don’t believe you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its angry violent dogs literally biting six unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I don’t believe you would so quickly commend the policemen if you would observe their ugly and inhuman

treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you would watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you would see them slap and kick old Negro men and young Negro boys; if you will observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I'm sorry that I can't join you in your praise for the police department.

It is true that they have been rather disciplined in their public handling of the demonstrators. In this sense they have been rather publicly "nonviolent." But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the last few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong or even more so to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Maybe Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather publicly nonviolent, as Chief Pritchett was in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of flagrant injustice. T.S. Eliot has said that there is no greater treason than to do the right deed for the wrong reason.

I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer, and their amazing discipline in the midst of the most inhuman provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, courageously and with a majestic sense of purpose, facing jeering and hostile mobs and the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a 72-year-old woman of Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride the segregated buses, and responded to one who inquired about her tiredness with ungrammatical profundity: "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested." They will be the young high school and college students, young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders courageously and nonviolently sitting-in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the

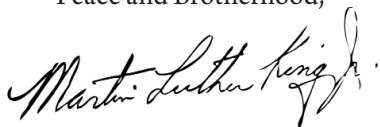
best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, and thus carrying our whole nation back to great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written a letter this long (or should I say a book?). I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything in this letter that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

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 their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of
Peace and Brotherhood,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Martin Luther King, Jr." in a cursive script.

Martin Luther King, Jr.



THE TRINITY FORUM



Group Discussion Guide

Discussion Questions

- 1** What are the reasons King gives for being in Birmingham? In the beginning of his letter, how does he establish his credibility to speak to the local context of that city?
- 2** How do the Foreword and King's letter describe segregation in Birmingham in the 1960s? What images or examples stand out to you, and why?
- 3** King asserts, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Do you agree? What areas or acts of injustice do you see in society today? What responsibilities do we have to address injustice in our various spheres and communities?
- 4** What are King's four basic steps to a nonviolent campaign? How did the actions in Birmingham follow these steps? How do the Foreword's themes of compassion, urgency, justice, and courage relate to King's nonviolent strategy?
- 5** The leaders who wrote to King suggested that he promote negotiation rather than direct action. How does King respond to their call for negotiation? What does he say about the relationship between the "tension" that direct action creates and the process of negotiation?

6 The Foreword explains how King felt connected to those who opposed him, and how he avoided dehumanizing his enemies. How did King exhibit “hopeful, reconciling, and redemptive leadership”? What principles or strategies could leaders today glean from his example?

7 King says, “History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.” What is he relaying about the temptations of power? Does privilege obscure one’s ability to see injustice clearly?

8 How does the letter distinguish between just and unjust laws? What do you think of Dr. King’s approach to unjust laws? How does the argument that unjust laws degrade human personality relate to the Christian belief that each person is made in the image of God?

9 What kind of person most frustrated King in his struggle for civil rights? Why? Can you think of a time when you have been “more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice”? What factors contributed to the situation and to your response?

10 Why is King satisfied with being labeled an “extremist?” After reading his list of extremists from history, can you think of a few others? What qualifies them for the label?

11 Toward the end of the letter, King says he is disappointed with the church. Why do you think he explicitly links his love for the church with his disappointment? Do you agree with his assessment that the “contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound”?

12 What forms of separation or estrangement do you see in your own community? How might you encourage yourself and others to reach across barriers of difference—in personal relationships and in society?

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John Pollock, “William Wilberforce: A Man Who Changed His Times,” *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1996

Alexis de Tocqueville, “Democracy in America,” *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 2010



Further Resources

Taylor Branch, *A Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (Simon & Schuster, 1999)

Clayborne Carson, Tenisha Armstrong, Susan Carson, Erin Cook, and Susan Englander, *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Encyclopedia* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008)

David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (William Morrow, 1986)

The Morehouse College Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection, Atlanta University Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library

James M. Washington, editor, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Harper & Row, 1986)

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Additional copies may be purchased for titles including:

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