

Letter from birmingham



Martin Luther King Jr., is one of the most recognized, if not the greatest civil rights activist in this century. He has written papers and given speeches on the civil rights movement, but one piece stands out as one of his best writings. Letter from Birmingham was an intriguing letter written by King in jail in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. He was responding to a letter written by eight Alabama Clergyman that was published in a Birmingham Alabama newspaper in 1963 regarding the demonstrations that were occurring to stop segregation. The intended audience for this letter was of course the eight clergymen, but he also had a wider audience in mind because instead of sending each individual man a letter he had it published in the local newspaper.

In his letter, King starts by addressing the clergyman with My Dear Fellow Clergyman as if to put the men at ease and keep them open-minded. In the first paragraph King states that he does not usually respond to such correspondence, but compliments them by saying that since they are genuinely good men, then he would respond to their criticisms by writing this letter. In the second paragraph, he addresses the outsider issue. In the letter written by the clergyman they say (like it was something new), that they were now facing demonstrations led by outsiders (King). King wants them to know that he is not really an outsider but the president of The Southern Christian Leadership Conference with an affiliation in Birmingham. He wants to point out that he not only has organizational ties but also was invited to participate in the direct action program in Birmingham in support of desegregation.

In the course of the letter, King uses philosophical, religious and historical examples to get his points across. In the third paragraph he compares his

participation in Birmingham to that of the prophets of the eighth century and the Apostle Paul who also traveled to a foreign place to communicate their messages. Since King is also a man of the cloth (reverend) he is able to use these biblical characters in his letter to illustrate his knowledge of the bible and by justifying his actions on their terms he is also able to show his intelligent. In the next few paragraphs he talks about the demonstrations and the four steps in a nonviolent campaign which consist of collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist, negotiation, self-purification and direct action. He goes on to give the facts of the injustices occurring in Birmingham such as their record of brutality, Negro's unjust treatments in the courts and the unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches. He tells them that the Negro leaders had indeed tried to negotiate in good faith but the white leaders refused. In the next negotiations, promises were made so the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to postpone all demonstrations, but soon realized that they were lied to. In paragraph 10, King foresees the questions that are probably in the minds of the clergyman. He tells them that nonviolent direct action was necessary for the community to see that they must confront the issues so that they may be taken seriously and eventually he agrees with the clergyman that negotiations is the way to go. Kings tells the clergyman that he is not afraid of the word tension, he is saying that tension is a necessary evil to get the point across. He then compares himself to Socrates (Greek philosopher of Athens) who also thought that it was necessary to create tension so those individuals could rise from the bondage of myths to creative analysis. His reasons for causing tensions are so that the Negro's could rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to understanding and brotherhood.

In the rest of the letter he addresses many issues such as the legality of the demonstrations, the breaking of the law and the matter of him being referred to as an extremist. In paragraph fourteen he uses emotional reference when he says when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim. He doesn't call them Negro, so that the audience could relate to them. He wants them to know how a black man feels always feeling like a nobody and being afraid. In the next nine paragraphs he describes in detail the difference between a just law and an unjust law. This time he uses religious leaders such as St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Martin Buber and Paul Tillich as examples to get his idea across. He says that 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. He then uses Adolph Hitler to show that even though he committed heinous things, they were not against the law and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did was against the law. He wants them to know that even though they are breaking the law by protesting, he feels that it is necessary to progress in what they believe.

In paragraph 23, he begins to criticize the white moderates. People who say they agree with segregation but do not want the Negro people to demonstrate because they dont want their lives disrupted. King says that these people are worst than the Ku Klux Klan and other people of ill will, because of their shallow understanding.

Words

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