

The letter from birmingham jail

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“ Letter from Birmingham Jail” was written on April 16, 1963 by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It was written in response to the objections of white southern men. This letter explains Martin Luther Kings’ actions and tries to clarify and explain his protest for desegregation was necessary and definitely not untimely. The letter explains why he was in jail, the wrongful acts against African Americans during the civil rights era, and the use of direct action to make a difference. Dr Kings’ letter stands as a modern classic of argumentation partially due to his use of Aristotle’s three rhetorical appeals: ethos, logos, and pathos.

First of Aristotle’s three rhetorical appeals is ethos. Ethos is an appeal to the writer’s credibility. In Dr. Kings’ essay he used this appeal in this quote, “ But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms. ” (p. 212). King felt it was necessary for non-violent approach to be taken so that communication could open between the two races. Through non-violent action, crisis is formed and communities are forced to confront the issue.

King strongly believed the situation needed to be discussed rather than left as it was. Aristotle’s second appeal is logos. Logos is the appeal to logic. Martin Luther King was an excellent speaker and appealed to the logical side of most people. His essay took his knowledge and his talent of persuasion and summed up what he was working for and what he believed in. In Kings speech he wrote this, “ How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A law is a manmade code that squares with the moral law or law of

god. An unjust law is a code out of harmony with the moral law. ” (p. 215-216).

He shows the difference between just and unjust appealing to the reader’s logical side. King believes that justice too long is justice denied. Freedom must be demanded by the oppressed because the oppressor never voluntarily gives it. Aristotle’s final rhetorical appeal is pathos. Pathos is the appeal to the reader’s emotion. In Kings Letter he wrote this, “...when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she cant go to the amusement part that has just been advertised on television, and tears welling up in her eyes...” (p. 215).

This quote really tugs on the reader’s emotions as he/she can visualize the little girl starting to cry. King’s letter was intended to erase the “ clouds of racial prejudice” and bring some understanding of brotherhood to the communities throughout the Unites States. It is very difficult for a parent to have to tell their child they cannot do something because of the color of their skin. It is a shame that we were so hateful and small minded in the past, and all the suffering that had to happen before we finally realized that something so small as the color of your skin doesn’t determine what kind of person someone is.

King believes the message of integration is universal and anyone who lives in the United States cannot be considered an outsider regardless of race, color, religion, or creed. In “ The Letter from Birmingham Jail” King used all three of Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals for classical argument. King used ethos to appeal to the writer’s credibility; logos to appeal to the writer’s logic; and

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pathos to appeal to the writer's emotion. Martin Luther King's goals have been met, but only to some extent.

This writer views his letter as an influential part of history and a dramatic event that changes the Civil Rights Movement for the better. There is still hatred by some and fear which fuels hatred by others. Letter from Birmingham Jail attempts to make racist people understand King's urge for desegregation. He demonstrates the purpose behind the protest and its urgency by various examples throughout the letter. It's just so unfortunate that still today we have such small minded people even after Dr. King's powerful letter.