

Letter from a birmingham jail [king, jr.] 16 april 1963

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Ethos, Logos, and Pathos in A Letter From Birmingham Jail Martin Luther King wrote a letter while he was in prison because he helped in a protest done in Birmingham, Alabama. He felt the need to answer a letter by the clergy with one of his own. His response, was a direct appeal to the ethos, logos, and pathos of the audience that he targeted, the clergymen and the American people. Through his effective use of these 3 elements, he explained why he was in Birmingham, why changes were needed for segregation, and what he would do to help. He made one thing very clear to the African American and White American people at the time, human rights are something that one constantly works to achieve.

His sense of logic is well supported by the ethos in his letter where he shows his authority to speak about the topic of segregation and its harmful ways.

As he claimed in his opening statement,

“ Seldom 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 have little time for anything other than such correspondence 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 that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.” (2-6).

By setting a patient tone at the beginning of the letter he engages his readers in an open minded conversation regarding the current happenings in Birmingham.

Marting Luther King Jr. was such a highly respected man of his time that his

name left people with a strong sense of logic and emotional appeal . This can clearly be seen as he argues his logos that we must

“... consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made equal.”(161-162).

Such irrefutable arguments allow his logos arguments to look solid and unquestionable so his argument regarding the difference between just and unjust laws became a highly controversial one.

His emotional pleas in the letter use pathos as he addressed the Birmingham police force and their use of force when keeping peace and order in the city. By discussing the mistakes of the police officers during the protest rallies, he asks the public and the clergymen to rethink their position about the effectiveness of the police action. He asks,

“ I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen if you were to observe their ugly and inhumane treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you were to watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you were to see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you were to observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I cannot join you in your praise of the Birmingham police department. “ (par. 47)

With such a strong pathos addressed in his letter, it is enough to say that A letter From Birmingham Jail is truly one of the most effective speeches to

have ever used the ethos, pathos, and logos arguments due to the great effect it had over its readers at the time.

References

King, Martin Luther Jr. (1963). Letter from Birmingham jail. The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education institute. Retrieved from http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/resources/article/annotated_letter_from_birmingham