

Martin luther king's letter essay sample



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On April 3, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., announced plans to lead demonstrations in Birmingham until that city began to desegregate. Police Commissioner "Bull" Connor responded with attack dogs, and obtained a court injunction prohibiting further demonstrations. Defying the injunction, Dr. King marched. He was arrested and jailed for contempt. ("Poorly Timed March")

In jail, he read a statement of eight Birmingham clergymen who decried his aggressive tactics. In response, he penned a "letter," writing on scraps of paper smuggled to him by a black jail trustee, and finally on a pad his attorneys were allowed to leave him. ("Author's Note" introducing Letter)

Blacks in Montgomery had struggled for a century since slavery to achieve dignity only to be put down, arrested, and ignored. The city's civil rights leaders had felt it was time to stand firmly segregation; Dr. King agreed. While he maintained a strict, disciplined attitude of non-violence, he would not delay.

{W}hen 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 ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, . . . when your first name becomes "Nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) . . . and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs." . . . I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. ("Letter")

Although nominally a letter, this piece is stylistically a King sermon. It quotes scripture; cites Aquinas and Augustine; repeatedly analogizes gospel ideals to the contemporary setting. Dr. King held doggedly to his view that while all protests must be determinedly non-violent, the time had come for direct action. Negotiations had been tried many times, to no avail. The time had come to take direct action. (" Letter")

While the letter is nominally addressed to the eight clergymen. In his " Author's Note," Dr. King indicates that he wrote this piece for publication, intending to respond in kind to the clergy published statement opposing his tactics. (" Author's Note") Clearly, Dr. King was trying to reach an audience far beyond the eight clergymen. In reality, he was addressing the nation, calling all good people to understand that the time had come for the nation to come to grips with the horrible problems of segregation that were rampant, particularly throughout the South. . . , Dr. King clearly meant it to be read by the national and the world. To this end, he used his preaching style. Throughout these pages, one hears his rich voice, alter to cadences, rhythms, sounds of words. It was written, but it is a piece composed to be spoken. (Letter)

This letter was an remarkably effective piece. First, it showed why so many civil rights advocates were no longer satisfied with the glacial pace that white southerners were willing to move toward desegregation. Pouring out examples of the humility that too many blacks were continually subjected to, King said, " I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience."

He rejected the entire concept of an "outside agitator," by calling the nation to respond to the injustice it faced: "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 within its bounds." King took aim squarely at two groups which had consistently failed to speak out when they could have: the white moderates, and the church. He felt that both groups had tolerated injustice entirely too long, and it was time to stand up against the segregationists throughout the South, and in Birmingham in particular, to demand a change.

Immediately on its publication, this letter seized the nation's imagination. It served as a call for much of America beyond the South to embrace and support the civil rights' struggle, and help call a generation to its support. It also solidified Dr. King's position as the foremost spokesman of that movement, and ranks only slightly below his "I Have a Dream" speech among his documents as the piece which most influenced America.

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