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Martin Luther King Jr, “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” (1963)

The Civil Right movement of 1950 and 1960 was a period of time which has always had just one perspective, not until the 1990’s and 2000’s cruel stories of segregation have been brought up to light. As a result, many publishers, authors and film-makers have recreated all these events, in order to inform citizens and people from all around to world what really happened. This period was full of cruelty and humiliations towards black people. One of the most important documents of this period was the letter from Birmingham Jail by Martin Luther King. He was the “head” of this movement of equality. In the book Civil Rights Movements written by Wendy Conklin, she describes this epoch as “Imagine there are laws that say you cannot drink from certain water fountains. Restaurants do not serve you. Bus drivers will not let you to sit where you want on their buses. And, all of this is happening because of the color of your skin. These actions are caused by segregation. This is how it used to be for African Americans in the United States. Then, some brave individuals began the Civil Rights Movement and life began to change” (Conklin).

As we mentioned before, Martin Luther King was the “head” or the leader of the civil rights movement. He and other leaders (such as Rosa Parks, Malcom X, etc.) made a huge contribution in order to defend minorities’ rights. As he mentions in his letter, he was calling for protests and non-violent acts against segregation, “Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked 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 promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here (King)”.In this extract, he states how we was being responsible for his actions in order to guarantee civil and natural rights for African American Communities.

According to Barbara Maranzani a reporter from History Channel web page, she states that “Four days earlier, on April 12, King and nearly 50 other protestors and civil rights leaders had been arrested after leading a Good Friday demonstration as part of the Birmingham Campaign, designed to bring national attention to the brutal, racist treatment suffered by blacks in one of the most segregated cities in America—Birmingham, Alabama” (Maranzani). On April 06, 1963 King was imprisoned in Birmingham Jail, Alabama. During his time in Birmingham, he wrote a famous letter that has been respected throughout history. It expresses King’s feelings and black people’s feelings toward the unjust events that were going on by 1963 in American. It demonstrated his reasons and how he approached the idea of Civil Rights movement of 1950’s and 1960’s.

The content of this letter served as an inspirational document for many people by that time. To begin with, the first three words of this extract are “My Dear Fellow Clergymen”, he is addressing the clergymen criticism about his actions and his status at Birmingham jail, also he talks to the clergymen who were causing trouble in the streets of Birmingham. Many of his followers argued that the fight should be at the same level, but he as a minister, responded to these critics on religious grounds. Also, he addressed on legal, political and historical grounds. “My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical 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 tend to be more immoral than individuals” (King). He states that legal and political pressure will determined civil rights alone. Also, nonviolent pressure will be the best weapon to achieve their goal. As an African-American, he spoke out all the country’s oppression of this group, including himself as a minister and orator. He used many persuasive techniques to reach hearts and minds of his audience --Ethos. “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 eyes when she is told that *Funtown* is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean? ” (King). This, and many other parts of this letter addressed the inferior and humiliating sentiment that Black people had by that time. As he addressed in his letter, he was invited to Birmingham because it was probably the most racially divided city in the country “I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here. But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here” (King).

Throughout this letter, we can see how Martin Luther King Jr. makes a call for unity, not only as a country, but as one race, the human race. He states that "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… Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds”(King). He warned white people that if they rejected his nonviolent activist, this will encourage millions of African Americans to “seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies, a development that will lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare.” (King).

Luther King, towards the criticism of his nonviolent actions (public actions such as sit-ins and marches) confirmed that his activists were using nonviolent direct action in order to create constructive tension. This tension was meaningful to get into negotiations with the white power structure, without it civil rights will never be achieved.  He cited previous experiences of failed negotiations where black community was left with “no alternative”. “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed(King).”

Against the civil disobedience King argued that it will not be justified in the face of unjust laws, but it was necessary and even patriotic, “I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law” (King) .In this paragraph he includes what makes laws just or unjust. "A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured? ” (King).He also contrasts when a law is “Just” for some and unjust for others “Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First-Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest” (King).

Towards the end of the letter he addresses the accusations that the Civil Rights movement was “extreme”. He compared this movement with other movements at the time, and he defined himself as a moderate. However, in his devotion of this cause, he considered himself as an extremist. He states that Jesus and other great reformers were extremists too. "So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension 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” (King). King's discussion of extremism responded to “[moderate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moderate)" objections to movement. In general frustration with both white moderates and certain "opposing forces in the Negro community”.

By the end of the letter, King criticized the clergy's praise of the Birmingham police for maintaining order nonviolently. Recent public displays of nonviolence by the police body were in contrast to their typical treatment of black people. This “public relations” helped "to preserve the evil system of segregation." Instead of the police, King praised the nonviolent activists in Birmingham, "for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes.” (King).

 In conclusion, we can state that this letter served as an inspiration for all Americans of all races. Also, it marked a new start for the Civil Rights movement. When blacks thought all was lost because their leader was imprisoned, this letter gave them faith to keep fighting until they could get the amendment passed. However, it is also important to understand that under the constitution tenet “all men are created equal”, there has been always a racial segregation in America. In addition, he did not have a sheet of paper where to write this letter, he wrote it in the corners of a newspaper. This, shows his desire to change what for him and millions of Americans was wrong. I believe that sometimes, we have to remember where we come from to know where we are going to.

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