

**‘LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL’- DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING,
JR.: TOKENISM TO SIMPLE CONCRETE STEPS TO MASSIVE SOCIAL CHANGE**

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the African American icon and the revered leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S, rose to International fame after having served as a pastor of the Baptist Church in Alabama in the South where “separate but equal” law was practised. He played an active role in putting an end to the unjust Federal policy of social segregation of the African American citizens in the South and other areas of the nation, as well as the creation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Birmingham campaign began on April 3rd, 1963 with planned marches and sit-ins against racial inequality in America spec. in Birmingham, Alabama. The non-violent campaign was coordinated by ACMHR (Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights) and SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference). On April 10th, 1963, a Court Injunction was issued against such protests. Leaders of campaign announced that they would disobey the court injunction.

“In the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. organized a demonstration in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. Entire families attended. City police turned dogs and fire hoses on demonstrators. Martin Luther King was jailed along with large numbers of his supporters, but the event drew nationwide attention. However, King was personally criticized by black and white clergy alike for taking risks and endangering the children who attended the demonstration. From the jail in Birmingham, King eloquently spelt out his theory of non-violence: ‘No-violent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community, which has constantly refused to negotiate, is forced to confront the issue.’ “¹

On the day of arrest, a statement in the form of a letter came in the newspaper with a heading ‘A Call for Unity’ by eight white Alabama Clergymen against Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his methods in Birmingham. In reply, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. writes an elaborate letter titled ‘The Letter from Birmingham Jail’- an Open letter on April 16th, 1963, from the solitary confinement cell in Birmingham spontaneously yet with great clarity and perfect logic.

It is one of the gems of his writings on the role of ‘American Civil Rights Movement’, the advocacy of ‘Non-Violence’ and the Course of the Racial Justice for the African-American in realizing his/her dreams in America. This paper brings out how Martin

Luther King Jr. took the steps in simple but concrete way to achieve a massive social change for his society thereafter.

“We can also see this through the context of the letter; that King wants freedom for African-Americans. The purpose of this letter is that Martin Luther King is trying to convince the clergymen that him and his ‘people’ demonstrated because it was absolutely necessary at that time. When doing this, he uses condemnatory and persuasive tones to try to influence the reader to agree with him.”² He also makes it a well knit work for Non-Violent Protest and Methodology, to achieve racial equality and justice. The essence of the letter is expressed in the words of Martin Luther King Jr. itself that: ‘The Oppressed people can’t remain oppressed forever.’

Martin Luther King Jr.’s letter served a four-fold purpose: to establish himself as a legitimate authority in the eyes of his audience, to show the trials of the black in America, to justify his cause and to argue the necessity of immediate action.

In jail he fell into a vacuum and he passed into a stage where day and night were indistinct. But this was a very special spiritual experience. “He said in a speech three weeks later in Birmingham, ‘every time I go (to jail), it’s a new spiritual experience. You can get a lot of things done that you need to do and you can’t get done in the hurly-burly of everyday life. Jail helps you to rise above the miasma of everyday life. You can think about things. You can meditate a little.’”³ During this time in jail, the white clergymen created a new religious-rhetorical situation for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to carve a comprehensive plan of his Civil Rights Movement in paper with all possible knowledge and language, using variety of historical, literary and biblical techniques.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s letter became very important throughout history because it expresses his feelings toward the racial inequality and unjust social structures of America. It is a well written-argument shaped into a letter. His letter also sums up of his purpose in American Civil Rights Movement that he led. Most importantly, this letter also explains the present events in Birmingham in 1963 as well as in the rest of America, and it enumerates the approach and method Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, took throughout the whole Civil Rights Movement of 1950’s and 1960’s.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the Letter from Birmingham Jail addresses important key words like Outsider, Unwise, Untimely, Wait, Laws, Disappointment about White moderates, Extremes, Non-Violent Direct Action and Church for Social Change.

He tells White Clergymen that he was upset about their criticisms and that he wishes to address their concerns. First, he says that he is not an ‘Outsider’, who has come to Birmingham to cause trouble. He defends his right to be there stating that though SCLC is based in Atlanta, it operates throughout South. One of the affiliates had invited the organization to Birmingham, which is why he came. He also provides a moral reason for his

presence saying that he came to Birmingham to battle injustice. He also calls them to see why they are protesting.

King, Jr., was quite convinced of the process or steps of non-violent direct action. He says that, when all negotiations failed, he advocated non-violent direct action and his protests are 'Constructive and Non-violent.' It is necessary to end the social segregation and inequality in America. He argues against the idea 'Untimely' and says that we have waited for 340 years. He also presents various racial segregations that they experience. He reiterates that they obey just law and stand against unjust law. He brings the view that anything that perpetuates racial segregation is unjust and any law that helps is unjust law. "Even some just laws, such as permit requirements for public marches, are unjust when used to uphold an unjust system."⁴

Reaching out to White moderates becomes a necessity for their silence disappointed him. They value 'order' over 'justice' and hence racial segregation persists. He also attacks the demands of patience. He says that he is not 'extreme' and he stands between two - in the middle, offering a path towards non-violent loving protest. He also cautions if the white and others don't support, there is possibility of people turning towards violence. "King also warned that if white people successfully rejected his nonviolent activists as rabble-rousing outside agitators, this could 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.'⁵

He accepts that he is an extremist, but a creative extremist who works for positive cause. The silence of the white moderates has saddened him. He says that Civil Rights movement is not just a social movement unrelated to the Church. It should become part of the Church, a force for Social Change. "The content of King's 'Letter from the Birmingham City Jail' was actually meant for all Christians who struggle with issues of church-state relations and with questions about their moral obligation toward society."⁶ He appreciates few moderates, who have shared with his mission, he is optimistic in his view.

At the close, he speaks of the atrocities of Birmingham Police. He expresses his wish that the non-violent struggle for racial justice by the African Americans must be appreciated. He apologizes finally for the length and potential over statement of the letter. He hopes that they will understand and stand with him in the cause of peace and brotherhood in America.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. chose Direct action of non-violence than violence. He wanted to create a situation, so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. It points out his conception of Civil Rights Movement and Democracy. It is one of the best written argumentative pieces of English literature.

As an eloquent and efficient preacher, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. knew how to present the matter in his letter. He speaks of his own state in jail and says that it is the

same state of every Negro in America. At the very opening he evokes the sympathy and the empathy of the readers.

He provides a valid argument using Logos, Pathos and Ethos throughout his letter. He uses 'Logos' in his letter to backup his counter argument against the white clergymen. In his letter, he tries to support the fact that they had no alternative except to prepare for direct action. "He proves his point in many ways, including using historical evidence in his letters, like when he writes. He also has some logical fallacies, such as appeals to authority, like when he writes, 'Thomas Jefferson: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...' This is an appeal to authority because he is using a famous person that most people respect, and telling the audience that he thinks this, so it must be true."⁷ He uses plenty of examples as valid logos to make sure the reader understands his point.

Along with using logos, he also uses 'Ethos'. He is reasonable, knowledgeable, and moral. He shows that he is reasonable when he says, 'We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional God-given rights.' This is reasonable because the Clergymen are telling him to wait, and he is being reasonable because he did wait- for 340 years. He also shows that he is knowledgeable when he states that 'We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal".' He uses his historical knowledge to help prove his point and to help get people to understand his point better. Finally, he is moral in that when he says, '...so we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.' "This is moral because his main goal is for everyone to be together and at peace."⁸

The last rhetorical appeal that he uses is 'Pathos'. One prime example of pathos is, when he says '...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 Fun town is closed to coloured children.' "This is a good example of pathos because this is a general topic that would make anyone feel guilty or sad, in that people feel more sympathy for children, and a normal person would feel bad if they are reading this. When people start to feel bad about the problem, it helps them choose Martin Luther King's side in the argument."⁹

His letter fully contains good use of logos, ethos and pathos; to support his point of view. He also has a clear intended audience in his letter that is the White Clergy and White Moderates. This audience was mostly persuaded by his letter because of his good use of rhetorical devices and valid information and evidence that the demonstration was absolutely necessary at the time.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s rhetorical strategy was the use of loaded language. "King used loaded language to help get across the horrors that were happening to the African-Americans. One example of this is when King said, 'But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim'. This statement told about the vicious and evil crimes that were happening against the African Americans. King used this example because all people have a soft spot in their hearts for their family members. King also used emotionally loaded words such as kill, curse, and kick."¹⁰

Martin Luther King Jr. presented the complete letter in a style filled with value loaded matters. "He captured the high ground with his contrasting hierarchies of values, and he restored harmony by means of a unifying value system derived from a mutual Judeo-Christian and American democratic heritage."¹¹

Martin Luther King Jr. used metaphors to get his point across. "An example of this is when King compared the progress of African-American's gaining rights in Africa and Asia to 'jet like speed.' He then went on to compare African American's gaining right in the United States to 'horse-and-buggy pace.'¹² He also uses many other metaphors like 'abyss of despair', 'clouds of inferiority' and 'airtight cage of Poverty' to describe the pathetic situation of African-Americans. He also uses anaphora by using the repetition of words like 'when you see..,' '...you see..' in a long sentence of the letter.

His language and adjectives also help him persuade the reader in this situation. "King's adjectives also help him persuade the reader in this situation. When he says that the tears were 'welling up' it adds imagery and the audience can actually picture this scene, and this will make people feel guilty or sad."¹³

Martin Luther King Jr.'s allies were overjoyed when he presented them with pages, which they quickly typed and circulated to the press. And yet the Letter had very little immediate impact. Instead other developments in the Birmingham campaign would ensure the movement's success. But later, the letter was admired and applauded when published officially in the 1964 book, 'Why Can't we wait?' Though overshadowed by the Landmark Speech 'I have a Dream', which he delivered only months after writing the letter, it is arguably that this latter work that has had the most lasting impact.

Martin Luther King Jr. made a historical statement at a mass meeting on May 5th, 1963 that: "I don't know how many of you would be able to write a history book, but you are certainly making history and you are experiencing history. And you will make it possible for the historians of the future to write a marvelous chapter."¹⁴ He moved with such conviction toward the impact of 'the Letter from the Birmingham Jail' and 'the Birmingham Campaign', that it would make a great change in the history of America.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter became a great document that not only exemplifies the non-violent crusade for American Civil Rights but also has influenced freedom movements throughout the world. It has been translated into several languages and used for non-violent protest in places like Argentina, Poland, China and Iran. For Historical Importance; for its clear explanation of the concepts of Non-Violence and Civil Disobedience; and for its unmistakable eloquence and rhetoric letter remains great master work of form and matter.

Martin Luther King Jr. wrote the letter: 'The Letter from Birmingham Jail', which looked simple at first sight but it was very concrete, practical and simple step. This step could bring about a massive social change. He wrote it out of his personal experience and convictions. Tokenism is the order of the day among the political leaders, who through some symbolic gestures try to address issues for political gain, without concrete impact. But on the contrary Martin Luther King Jr. worked in the grass-root level and came too close to the problems faced by people. He was convinced and wanted that both Whites and the African Americans to enjoy the freedom of America together because they all belong to one family.

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