

## ***Letter from Birmingham Jail: Overview***

“But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. The type of love that I stress here is not *eros*, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not *philia*, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is *agape* which is understanding goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of men. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization.”

--“The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma” (1957)

1. Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people.  
It is active nonviolent resistance to evil.  
It is aggressive spiritually, mentally and emotionally.
2. Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding.  
The end result of nonviolence is redemption and reconciliation.  
The purpose of nonviolence is the creation of the Beloved Community.
3. Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice not people.  
Nonviolence recognizes that evildoers are also victims and are not evil people.  
The nonviolent resister seeks to defeat evil not people.
4. Nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform.  
Nonviolence accepts suffering without retaliation.  
Unearned suffering is redemptive and has tremendous educational and transforming possibilities.
5. Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate.  
Nonviolence resists violence of the spirit as well as the body.  
Nonviolent love is spontaneous, unmotivated, unselfish and creative.
6. Nonviolence believes that the universe is on the side of justice.  
The nonviolent resister has deep faith that justice will eventually win.  
Nonviolence believes that God is a God of justice.

-- Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Six Principles of Nonviolence, *Stride towards Freedom* (1958)

### History

Contextualizing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (also published as “The Negro is Your Brother”) involves looking not only at the historical circumstances in Birmingham, Alabama, but also at the larger movements of which they played a part. While the American Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) was in many ways a mass movement, certain key events and persons are important to keep in mind:

- For example, the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka* opened up new legal grounds for African American protests.
- The 1955-56 Montgomery Bus Boycott, symbolically begun by Rosa Parks, and led by King, lasted over a year and was successful in ending bus segregation.
- In similar fashion, the 1957 organization of the Southern Leadership Conference around King's non-violent forms of resistance institutionalized the means of protest in a way that galvanized public opinion.
- That same year, the forced integration of Little Rock High School also captured the public imagination through wide media coverage.
- The 1960 Voter Rights Act established procedures to help guarantee African-Americans the right to register to vote and to vote.
- 1961 saw the beginnings of the Freedom Riders, advocates who rode interstate baselines in order to advocate that bus lines follow desegregation law.

- In 1964 King would receive the Nobel Peace Prize, further helping highlight worldwide the struggle for civil equality.
- In 1965, on March 7, a day that became known as “Bloody Sunday” and triggered national outrage, protestors were beaten at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The famous Selma to Montgomery would follow from March 17-25.
- King himself was assassinated in 1968, days before Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968 into law.

### Political Theology

“It is this [moral or personal] aspect of the death of Christ that alone gives it profound moral significance. Any theory of atonement which does not recognize this fact is quite inadequate. The true meaning of the atonement must be interpreted in the light of the incarnation, whose purpose and cause was, in the words of Abelard, ‘that he might illuminate the world by his wisdom and excite it to the love of himself . . . Our redemption, therefore, is that supreme love of Christ shown to us by his passion, which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but acquires for us true liberty of the sons of God . . . so that kindled by so great a benefit of divine grace, charity should not be afraid to endure anything for his sake.’ The spiritual justification of this view is found in the emphasis that it places on the sacrificial love of God. As stated above, the death of Christ is a revelation or symbol of the eternal sacrificial love of God. This is the agape that Nygren speaks of in his Agape and Eros. The love of God is spontaneous in contrast to all activity with a eudaemonistic motive. The divine love is purely spontaneous and unceasing in character. God does not allow his love to be determined or limited by man's worth or worthlessness. “For he maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sendeth rain on the just and unjust” (Mt. 5:45). The divine love, in short, is sacrificial in its nature. This truth was symbolized, as stated above, by the death of Christ, who, because of his unique relation to God and his moral perfection, made this truth more efficacious than any other martyr. Here is the doctrine of the atonement presented in a moral, spiritual, and personal form. This seems to me the only theory of atonement adequate to meet the needs of modern culture.”-- “A View of the Cross Possessing Biblical and Spiritual Justification” [seminary paper] (1950)

Contextualizing King’s letter also means coming to terms with King’s own political theology. He married together traditional black theology, which often arose from the churches themselves, with the mainline liberal theology that he was taught at Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University. He was particularly drawn to the ideas of Reinhold Niebuhr, as well as to existential theologians such as Paul Tillich and the Jewish personalist, Martin Buber. While they helped King voice the cry for social justice and the call for non-violence (for which he was particularly drawn to the ideas of non-Christians, such as Thoreau and Gandhi), they also at times played into King’s own doubts about the veracity of the scriptures and even the historicity of the virgin birth and resurrection of Jesus. Yet King could also counter-charge that liberal demythologization of the scriptures made the call to justice weak. He wrote that he learned from Niebuhr:

[ . . . ]the complexity of man's social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil. I realized that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism. I also came to see that the superficial optimism of liberalism concerning human nature overlooked the fact that reason is darkened by sin. The more I thought about human nature, the more I saw how our tragic inclination for sin encourages us to rationalize our actions. Liberalism failed to show that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations.

Debate continues among scholars of King’s thought as to how seriously to take these doubts or as to how he employed them, in particular in ways that helped ignite black theological themes which were already present in his Black Baptist upbringing. All this is rendered more problematic since King as hero is claimed by many different groups, and thus, his legacy is more than a matter of simple history. Some

argue, for example, that some of these doubts disappeared as the struggle for justice purified King, while others claim that without liberal theology, King might have gone on to be simply a middle-class Baptist pastor and not the cultural prophet he became.

Theologian James Cone defended King as ultimately deriving his spiritual and political power from orthodox black theology and not from the modernist theology of liberal or neo-orthodox strains:

In moments of crisis when despair was about to destroy the possibility of making a new future for the poor, King turned to the faith contained in the tradition of the black church. Whether one speaks of Montgomery, Albany, Birmingham, Selma, or Chicago, the crises arising from his struggle to implement justice never produced despair in his theological and political consciousness. The reason is not found in his intellectual grasp and exposition of white liberal theology but in the faith and life of the black church. With the resources of this religious tradition, he had a foundation that could sustain him in his struggle for justice.

How important, then, to King is the balance of natural law and theistic personalism with a call to public justice and the moral example of redemption in Christ? Likewise, what are the grounds for the promise of redemptive suffering and faith in the struggle for justice and human flourishing?

### Discussion Questions

1. How does the letter of the eight white clergy contextualize what King was advocating?
2. Were the actual clergy his real audience? Why and/or why not?
3. How does King go about answering the following objections: a) that the movement was not locally initiated; b) that the movement created violent tensions in the community; c) that all laws should be obeyed; and d) that reform should go more slowly?
4. What are the steps that King outlines before a non-violent protest should take place? How are these important to his spiritual and ethical understanding of the nature of protest?
5. How did the insights of Reinhold Niebuhr shape King's reasoning?
6. Likewise, how do the examples of post-colonial movements in India and Africa provide examples for the American Civil Rights movement?
7. How does King sketch out a theory of natural law and just law? What principles does he draw from Augustine, Aquinas, Buber, and Tillich? Are these consistent with his own claims?
8. Can a view of law based on personality and one of law based on divine justice be coterminous? Why and/or why not?
9. Why does King suggest that the response of white moderates is actually more problematic than that of racists, such as the KKK?
10. What kinds of conceptions does King bring to notions of time, history, and political change?
11. What makes his examples of "extremists in love" important for his perceived audience?
12. How does a theology of non-violence require not only belief but also practice?
13. What does King mean by "the beloved community"?
14. What practical charges does he make against white Christian moderates?
15. How would you describe the logic and rhetoric of his letter?
16. What makes King's argument a Christian one? Explain your answer.