

Noah Hapke

Prof. Brodsky

RHET 110

26 September 2016

A Religious and Educated Scholar: King's Ethos in "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

Word Count: 1,481

Even after the Civil War between the North and South states and signage of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865, African Americans in the United States were still socially viewed, and legally treated, unfairly. When the "separate but equal" doctrine was overturned in 1954 on the federal level, states and cities took it into their own hands to keep segregation alive by creating Jim Crow laws which kept African Americans out of many restaurants, bus systems, houses and apartments, public schools, and restrooms (Brodsky 8-9). In the height of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference under Martin Luther King, Jr.'s guidance demonstrated a peaceful march through Birmingham streets on Good Friday of August 1963 (13-14). After King, as well as many other protesters, were thrown into jail, eight white clergymen wrote a response to the prevalent civil disobedience titled "A Call for Unity," asking the Black protesters to halt on their actions and wait for judicial assistance to step in and work together with locals (13-14, 18). Four days after its publication on August 12th, King finished writing a response to their stigma against the movement on the sides of the *New York Times* while in solitary confinement (13). King's 20-page letter titled "Letter from Birmingham Jail" spread rapidly through not just Birmingham but many urban cities and suburbs throughout the South (13).

First paragraph:
background

The clergymen had labeled the Civil Rights protests as “unwise and untimely” and more specifically focused on attacking King’s leadership by undermining his professional leadership as both an educator for civil disobedience as well as a religious figure (18). Before arriving to Birmingham, many individuals, especially among those of white descent, questioned not just the urgency for the non-violent protests but King’s validity as a leader of the movement. Many viewed him as extreme and unfaithful to the righteousness of God, and uneducated about what a movement for civil rights really encompasses. King, however, holds multiple degrees including a Doctorate from Boston University in 1955 and served as pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery where he proudly preached about the political and social needs of African Americans (10-11). He held leadership positions for many Black movement groups in the South, and prepared others for the difficulty of remaining peaceful even when white and dedicated Christians may act out in terrible violence against them. In King’s letter to these people, including educated white individuals and Christian moderates, he expresses why he is the right type of leader for this movement by underlining his past experience guiding civil disobedience and his strong personal and influential connection to the church (King 356-71). thesis

Before King arrived to Birmingham, people criticized the general way the Black community was going about protests, viewing them as unprofessional, unprepared, and poorly structured. What the majority of Americans failed to recognize was that these protests were the opposite. Under King’s guidance, the Civil Rights’ peaceful protests were sternly practiced and impressively understood by those demonstrating. In the opening of King’s letter, he specifically underlines his astounding knowledge of practicing civil disobedience in a non-violent manner to give not only verbal critics but also ignorant bystanders a better insight into what the protests

embody and why King is a credibly significant leader. In the second paragraph, he underlines how “[he has] the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference” and immediately sets off a professional tone through doing so (357). Highlighting his own status in the Black-movement community, as well as listing his “opportunity to talk with [white] leaders of Birmingham’s economic community” he exhibits how he had personally cooperated with both racial groups to counter opponents’ views that King himself is a radical segregationist against white individuals (358). He emphasizes that this movement is not solely for African Americans— it is to bring about a better relationship between ethnicities in the United States. King highlights these examples of collaboration to illustrate his professionalism as well as ability and desire to negotiate with people of all racial and cultural backgrounds. While white conservatives are discouraging others against the Black movement and aiming for more segregation, King skillfully shows how he works with both groups peacefully, raising his perceived-perception as a skilled leader in hopes of getting others to see his actions as reasonably extreme. As the insightful individual he is, “[King and others] began a series of workshops on nonviolence” to teach the young protestors how to resist retaliation against white perpetrators (358). This is not King’s first act of peaceful defiance in public and he ensures to his critics that he is aware of the psychological thoughts protestors will want to express in response to physical harm from intense retaliators. By underlining this process, King elevates his status to one of immense understanding of what it means to lead a march as well as thousands of urban youth. He argues that these young men and women had been trained to do what they are doing, and by exemplifying this hopefully educated white individuals will see the value of the protests. King’s ability to articulate both his resume of experiences and his academic lense is one way in which

King is socially and scholarly understanding and serves as an unquestionable representative of this movement.

Like the eight clergymen do in “A Call for Unity,” many Christian moderates label King as an extremist with a lack of understanding of what it means to be a religious follower. Facing blatant anger from white Christians due to his consistent forms of resistance, King openly recognizes his faced-criticism and explains that his actions are exactly what any dedicated follower of Christ should be doing. He counters this idea with stating that the true faith holder is one who will not be a silent observer but rather a vocal advocate against “the ‘do-nothingism’ of the complacent [and] the hatred and despair [towards] the black nationalist” (King 364). King brings light to how too many Christians specifically had been watching the violent attacks against innocent Black men and women, perpetuated from those of the same religious faith, and did nothing. He ponders on the fact that it “is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Klu Klux Klan, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than justice” (362-3). King’s emphasis that he will not be a silent Christian who watches sin play out in daily society serves as a call to action for these moderates, asking them to join his honorable religious mission. King highlights many prior religious figures who mirror his own beliefs as well in efforts of demonstrating his profound historical knowledge of Christianity. Comparing himself to other prior-labeled extremists who later were appreciated for their brave acts of service to their communities, he points out figures like: Jesus, Prophet Amos, Paul the Apostle, Martin Luther the priest, and Baptist Preacher John Bunyan during the Pilgrim Progress to put himself on the same level of leaders who both Black and white Christians heavily look up to (365). King connects himself to those Christians attacking his own prominence to argue that he is doing

exactly as these faithful men did before him. Those Christians criticizing King's peaceful protests are the same as who praise these listed individuals as leaders of change and social justice. King makes these references while in solitary confinement to hint to the fact that, if these Christians were as dedicated to faith and human good as they say they are, they too should be able to make this connection. It is not enough to be religious and allow injustice to remain prevalent; it takes a real Christian, as King alludes, to use their voice and body as a form of intolerance to discrimination.

As history plays out, King certainly is a powerful force that Americans of all racial and religious backgrounds need and admire. He openly takes the criticism from others and provides feedback that is both peaceful and educational. King did not step into his role as a leader without practice, and he demonstrates this clearly through his articulation as an educated and religious professional. In doing so, he is listed as one of, if not the, most influential people of the Civil Rights Movement. People today, many whom fall into the same group as those of King's audience in "Letter from Birmingham Jail," now view groups like Black Lives Matter as extreme and radical, asking why they cannot be more like the Civil Rights Movement. The Black Lives Matter group underlines King's own ideal, "Since we know that the system will not change the rules, we are going to have to change the system" (Tometi). King understands the system of the United States and saw that, without bringing about the uncomfortable topic of segregation and oppression, African Americans would never see the physical change in their lives that many now see today.

Works Cited

Brodsky, Nicole. *Workbook*, San Francisco, pp. 7-16, 18.

Eyes on the Prize. Produced by Henry Hampton, narrated by Julian Bond, PBS, 1987.

King, Martin Luther Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." *Argument in America*, edited by Jack Selzer, Penguin, 2004, pp. 356-71.

Tometi, Opal, and Gerald Loir. "Black Lives Matter Is Not a Civil Rights Movement." *Times*, 2015, <http://time.com/4144655/international-human-rights-day-black-lives-matter/>.

Accessed 25 September 2016.