

Five Ways to Respond to the Letter from Birmingham Jail

From DavidDrury.com

It has been 50 years since Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Fifty years is a long time. You might wonder what we should do now that 50 years have passed. From the start we should acknowledge that *we* have not responded in general, and *we* I mean the church. No reply was ever given to Dr. King's letter. But before you and I get sucked up into the corporate confession, perhaps it would be wise to think about how I as an individual have responded.

I am prone to read Dr. King's letter thrice removed—to see it, and the Civil Rights movement, through the eyes of my forebears, and then through their eyes to the “bad people” who let so much evil happen to people of color—thus thrice removed. But it is a much more convictional experience to read his letter as though it was addressed to me, David Drury, directly.

“I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

[All references to *The Letter* hereafter refer to *The Letter from Birmingham Jail* by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.]

It is hard for me to enumerate a list of things I have personally done to oppress anyone. However, I must admit that I have too casually gained awareness that I am a member of what has been the “oppressor race.” I cannot fully understand the “deep groans” and it takes discipline and selflessness to have the vision to root out injustice. I'm thankful for the deep love of those who have bridged the ethnic gap to befriend me, enlisting me in the cause of justice rooted in the joy of friendship. This has helped me to focus on ways I can still make a difference. So on this 50th year occasion I want to respond to Dr. King's letter personally.

I am trying to respond to Dr. King in at least five ways and I hope you do too: to **celebrate the progress** that has already been achieved, to **confess the sins** of the past and the present for myself and corporately, to **continue the struggle** against prejudice and racism, to **find the new fights** which MLK and the Civil Rights Movement should inform us in today, and to **be ever vigilant** in the future so a “never again” promise is fulfilled.

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Celebrate the Progress

In the spring of 1963 eight white clergymen in Birmingham, Alabama, wrote an open letter with a thinly veiled reference to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as an “outsider” provoking their community. This was the occasion of the historic *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, which King wrote in reply fifty years ago to the day I began writing this piece. *The Letter* was smuggled from the jail, in bits and pieces written in the margins of newspaper print and on scraps of paper, which were then pieced together.

The Letter went on to become perhaps the single most important document of the Civil Rights era, and continues to be studied today. But how should we respond to the letter, since no formal response was formulated to the letter in 50 years?

One of the first ways I think we can respond to the letter is to celebrate the progress since the 1960s. Don’t worry, we’ll talk about how the job isn’t done in coming points, but first, we should celebrate how far we’ve come. Was the Civil Rights Movement a success? Well, in many ways the answer is a resounding: “yes.” Especially so if we ask it in a slightly different way: “Was King successful?”

I can think of at least 5 ways Martin Luther King Jr. succeeded even in his life so cut short by assassination:

1) Legal Success

On face value there are some laws that were changed as a direct result of King’s leadership and lawmakers in Washington responding to the national outcry for change. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 were huge successes and enabled the civil rights movement to enact nationwide change. The day of “mind your own business” was over. As King said in his letter:

“Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. 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.”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

2) Public Opinion Success

The way that King led had a huge effect as well. King wasn’t just the “leader of the Civil Rights Movement” he was a leader many American began to respect for just being a great leader. I’ll go a step further and say that in a way King helped America become America. Before this, our national identity was a bit less cohesive. Talk all you want about “states rights” but when the state wants the right to segregate people based on color America should overrule that—(I’m putting on my Federalist Papers fan hat right now). As a comparison, I would say that I think the rights of the unborn shouldn’t be relegated to a “states rights” issue, so that some states kill and others don’t. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere indeed.

King and his movement helped shape the view most Americans have of African-Americans. There’s a reason that many men and women who don’t share King’s race find in him a leader that they emulate. As a leader who led the way he led, with

courage and deep skill, the opinion of those unaffected directly by segregation changed radically. We decry the “political correctness” that has frozen debate, but we forget the kinds of things that were still being said in the 60s. At least the movement has had the success of exposing racist talk as unacceptable.

Perhaps the most telling sign of public opinion success is how we see “little black boys and girls... holding hands with little white boys and girls” all the time... and it is not out of the ordinary. Our children play together, worship together, and study together. There is still work to be done—but so much progress has been made on this front. Plainly, racism has lost most of the battles since 1960, and we have King and his movement to thank for much of that.

3) Leadership & Politics Success

While there have not been as many successes in education and economics as a whole as we would like—there is a sense that King’s leadership resulted in a raised ceiling for black leaders. Throughout our system of government we find black leaders who are elected to office, and now even the Presidency is not out of reach for an African-American child as they see we already have a minority in office (what a radical change from 50 years ago!). Likewise, it seems that Ricky Rubio is one of the front-runners in the Republican nomination speculation, and he is Hispanic. The ceiling has been lifted on minorities leading us. Some speculate that King himself may have been elected president if not assassinated. That’s an interesting thought-exercise. I don’t believe that would have happened. However, a Carter-King or even Carter-Reagan run off might have been a fascinating thing to watch!

I wonder if we forget how feared King was by the great majority of white America (and in fact how divisive a person he still is to many, for reasons I can’t quite comprehend myself). He speaks of the “white moderate” in his letter from Birmingham Jail, saying:

“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season.’”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

4) Non-Violent Success

Another way in which King was successful was in advancing the notion of non-violent protest. With his insistence on non-violence we had a revolution, but a quite bloodless one. Or, at least, the oppressor race didn’t bleed much. It was an honor for me to be at a recent event in Birmingham, Alabama, and to hear from three leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference including Dorothy Cotton & John

Lewis. Mrs. Cotton shared about the intensive training their protesters received, to prepare them to “receive blows and not return them” and to respond to humiliation and force with peace and humility. We talk about how progressive the Civil Rights Movement was but one of King’s successes was holding off the “frightening racial nightmare” that would occur if change did not come.

While he speaks much about the White Moderate in his letter, King also speaks about the “Negro Nationalist.” His letter states:

“The other force is one of bitterness and hatred... Nourished by the Negro’s frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination, this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible ‘devil.’ I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the ‘do nothingism’ of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle. If this philosophy had not emerged, by now many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood.”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

The great success of this non-violence is interesting to me, especially in light of the words from President Barack Obama when he accepted his Nobel Peace Prize in 2009. I say all this notwithstanding the fact that so many think that award undeserved for lack of a track record (including Obama himself, who said among other similar statements: “To be honest, I do not feel that I deserve to be in the company of so many of the transformative figures who have been honored by this prize.”) Likewise, Obama’s military reign has been a quite bloody one since then, even if few know about it.

In his award speech, Obama commented on King’s philosophy of non-violence:

“I make this statement mindful of what Martin Luther King said in this same ceremony years ago – ‘Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones.’ As someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King’s life’s work, I am living testimony to the moral force of non-violence. I know there is nothing weak -nothing passive – nothing naïve – in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King. But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism – it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.”

-President Barack Obama, “A Just and Lasting Peace” Nobel Lecture

Some might say that's a pretty big "but" in there. I read this to say: a) King's work with non-violence was successful, **but** b) there are different rules for heads of state. I'm glad Obama pointed out the irony (or surely reporters would have for him) especially since the Nobel Peace Prize recipient had so recently become the head of the world's largest employer, the US Military.

In retrospect I think it a good thing that King was so successful in non-violence that his successor of sorts had to reference, with some amount of ambivalence, that he was not living up to King's example, even if he was walking in steps King's work made possible.

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Confess the Sins

There is a common objection to confession in reconciliation processes of any kind. The objections fall along two lines: First, I was not even alive/present when the sins were committed—why should I confess sins I had no part in? Secondly, confessions have already been given, and forgiveness asked for—why do we need to “keep this alive” by constantly confessing?

These are legitimate objections. Let me address both in turn:

The key to the first objection, I believe, is the nature of the confession. There are at least four kinds of confessions that may have a bearing on this discussion:

- 1) Individual Recent
- 2) Individual Past
- 3) Corporate Recent
- 4) Corporate Past

An individual present confession is one I make to another for something I've recently done. The second, individual past, is to confess sinful attitudes or actions “I had at one time” that I've never owned up to. The third is for a group corporately confessing sin that they have been committing more recently, and the fourth, likewise, is for a group corporately confessing sins that the group had historically engaged in.

Some clarity can be gained by pointing out these divisions, and to understand that at times one can confess for a group because membership in the group itself retains some responsibility, if not culpability, for the actions of a group, in the present or in the past. In my own life I find a responsibility for my family, my city, my denomination, etc.

Confessions of all these kinds are good for the soul—and by that I mean the soul of the person sinned against—who is given a gift of ownership of the sins against them, something not often done. I also mean the soul of the individual confessor—who need not carry the guilt, even associational guilt, in the future, and likewise may act out of true love, rather than guilt, in the future (i.e.: “white guilt”). And finally the

soul of the group itself is cleansed through such confession. I believe cities, churches, and even entire subcultures and races have been held back by unconfessed sin in the past. The enemy keeps these things alive when not confessed, when sin is in the camp, and the camp ignores it, or re-buries it each generation.

The second objection is perhaps a stronger one—and I think we need to be sensitive to the fact that we need not do “annual confessions” or provide “routine re-enactments of confession and reconciliation” where the oppressor dresses up in oppression regalia, and the ones who look like generations hence are again placed in the chains of “oppression reenactment.” That style of confession begins to make a farce of the act and includes its own kind of cyclical paternalism from the oppressor King mentioned in *The Letter*, if not a plausible re-victimization by the oppressed.

The way to ensure this doesn’t happen is to first ask: “have we actually ever confessed?” If we never have, as a group, then we need to. And each group might ask this question: I for myself see more responsibility to confess for my family, my city, and my denomination, than I see for “all white people”, in the case of the context of the Letter for Birmingham Jail, for instance. I don’t feel a need to confess for “white southerners...” Instead I feel a need to confess for my family, for my city, and for my denominational tribe—who were not as present as we might have been, and ignored the issues, all too much. Notably, the last public lynching of a black man took place in the town of my birth, Marion, Indiana. I confess for my people of Grant County and that is something I might do, and should do, and you, not being a native of that place, do not need to feel the need to do. If you are not of my denominational tribe or family, then you need not feel these confessions as strongly as I do. But they are here for you to learn from.

So, I confess here in two of the above ways: the second, and the fourth. Perhaps I could spend even more time on the present, but for now I engage this individually for the past, and corporately for the past.

Individual Past Confession

Personally, I have found myself to have racist attitudes and behaviors in my life. I have pre-judged people based on their skin color alone. I have felt unexpected danger and fear that is only explainable because of prejudicial attitudes. I have avoided some races over others, and have been drawn to support and associate based on racial divisions. I have personally not advanced or selected or favored those from other races, preferring my own kind at many times in the past. I have not personally been a part of the solution for much of my life—and have committed not only these acts of commission above but also thousands of acts of omission, where I might have been a help to racial division and inequality. I confess all the above and would love to be informed of other ways I have sinned. I not only confess those I omit but I am also willing to confess other sins I have committed at a future time, you need only help me see the failing. This is my confession, with sadness and shame, but with hope for forgiveness from God and from those I have sinned against.

Corporate Past Confession

Corporately, I focus on my Wesleyan tribe. It is timely that our denomination has been a part of a broader effort to acknowledge our sins of commission and omission during the civil rights movement in particular. Exactly 50 years after *The Letter* was written, my boss, Dr. Jo Anne Lyon (who is the General Superintendent of my denomination) said, “Dr. King’s letter must not be forgotten. It is a prophetic timeless message.” The letter includes such famous statements as, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” However, because there has never been a formal response to the letter, Dr. Lyon and others called us to make a public confession related to that fact, and incorporating our past corporate sins in the picture.

An assembly of church representatives gathered in Birmingham from April 14-15, 2014 on the anniversary of the event to present a response to *The Letter*. I was present on behalf of The Wesleyan Church so that we might too confess our part. We were there as a part of our connection to Christian Churches Together, the broadest Christian ecumenical group in America including African-American, Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Historic Protestant, and Orthodox Churches. CCT has led this effort with The Wesleyan Church’s involvement.

Dr. Lyon participated from the beginning in the drafting of the response document, which was led by Dr. Ron Sider, who has become a good friend to me and The Wesleyan Church, and has been friends with Dr. Lyon for decades. The Response includes confessions from each distinct CCT family, including one from our Evangelical/Pentecostal family. Our full confession, which I affirmed, is this:

“As the Evangelical/Pentecostal family of Christian Churches Together, we confess with sadness and shame that we were at best silent and often even hostile when Dr. King led the historic movement against racial injustice. We also confess that it has taken us far too long, in the intervening years, to acknowledge pervasive racism in our midst and begin to repent and change. Even now our people often fail to grasp the complex realities of structural racism.” [More information on the *Response to the Letter from Birmingham Jail* can be found online at christianchurchestogether.org]

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Continue the Struggle

In discussions about racism there has been the suggestion that we might be talking about this too much—that somehow we are “stuck” in a 60s era conversation and we need to move to another phase that is more productive. I’m sure people espousing this view would disagree with the previous way to respond to *The Letter*, to confess the sin of racism that still persists today.

My thinking on this point is that if one says “the best solution to the race issue is to stop talking about it” then one might also say “the best solution to the sin issue is to stop talking about it.” For me, many of the sensitive issues of our day are made clearer when you have a healthy and biblical view of sin and righteousness,

including the issue of racism. Our deeply held sinfulness doesn't just go away when we ignore it and move on. What's more, it doesn't just go away by talking about it either. We must keep talking about it, and keep walking a different walk—and also to admonish our brothers and sister when ones walk, and talk, betrays a sinful racist attitude or action, or at least hints at it. In our “political correctness is a sin” mentality sometimes people act like calling them out for this is just “PC nonsense.” Well, I'm not yet ready to call racism a political correctness issue, brothers and sisters.

For me, *The Letter* is a challenge, even here 50 years later, for me to continue the struggle against racism.

“Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

I think that some have a misunderstanding that all of our societies are naturally and “inevitably” moving more and more towards an absence of racism, and instead that our equality is assured, and instead we need to move on to other issues, or perhaps deeper problems. I disagree on this front. With King, I want to be a continued co-worker with God in the hard work of struggling with the racism alive and well today. It is possible to celebrate the progress made without losing sight of the continued struggle today.

How might we do this?

Well, for myself I think there are many layers of leadership in which I have a direct influence where prejudice unfairly influences things, and I can struggle against these on a practical level. So, I'm saying that there are hundreds of ways to continue the struggle *The Letter* outlines to us, but here are four that I am working on in my life. I ask myself four questions about racial prejudice that guide me, and perhaps these will help you too in your role in the world today:

Who is leading? – This is a question of who is making the decisions, who is in power, who has the right to set the direction? In my world as a pastor for years, this question had to do with who was on the board of the Church, and who were the key powerful decision makers on the staff. In my current role it is the board of the entire denomination, which we call our “General Board” and also the Executive Cabinet, which I am on, and then our District Superintendents, which are regional leaders of our denomination. I try to influence these arenas to ensure that minorities and women have more power. Some might say: “Just have the best people... be color and gender-blind.” I am not of that opinion: First, because becoming color and gender-blind is a myth—it's impossible. Instead, it is better to admit the bias of race and gender, and then work toward looking more like heaven. When people say: “Just get the best” and then everyone who is in power is a white male over 50, well, then I'm saying: “Perhaps you don't think a black person could ever be one of the best? Or

perhaps you don't think a woman or someone under 40 or someone who speaks English as a Second language is as smart as the old white male club?"

I remember a time when we had to intentionally find minorities who would be willing to be up for election, another time when we put an African-American woman on a board as a non-voting member for a season to raise her exposure, and make it more likely for her to be elected the next year (which she was.) I remember a time when our leaders needed to explicitly ask competent and very popular leaders to "take a break" on a board in order to open up a seat for an equally or even more competent but perhaps less popular minority leader to win their seat. These are the little things, behind the scenes, that can be done to continue the struggle.

Who is chosen? – There are times when I myself have a choice to make—a hiring decision or an appointment. I have worked to find ways to build relationships across ethnic lines in particular so I just have a better pool to choose from (for many of us that is the first step—we would, perhaps, choose more diverse teams if we just knew a more diverse group to choose from.) For me that meant going to different conferences, finding resumes and references in different places—widening my scope of relationships beyond the all white male seminary club I came from. In a few hires I've made in the last 5 years I held off on the completion of the process until I knew I had a truly diverse pool to choose from. If I didn't I would not shrug my shoulders and say: "Well, these are the 50 applicants I got... so I did my part." Instead, I'm seeing the pool's diversity itself as my responsibility.

What's more, I think that I need to choose a non-white candidate whenever possible, and understand that diversity itself is an asset to a team—just like having someone with a specific skill set or educational level or proficiency. I learned from a colleague once that a diverse team makes better decisions because it is far less likely for groupthink behavior to set in. On this note I wonder if the very popular "alignment" talk of many leadership guru's is being used as a subtle way to defend prejudice. Why is it that it is so hard for we middle-aged white men to get "alignment" from women and minorities on our staffs? Perhaps this is why.

Who is visible? – Here for me it is all about the faces. If all the faces on my print materials, all the people giving testimonies in my videos, and all the people on the stage singing and speaking are white, there is a problem. Sometimes we don't catch this until we train ourselves well, and so it's good to ask someone to sort of be the internal check on diversity. I've used others for this purpose in years past before I was sensitive enough to do it myself. Now I find myself building lists of "who could be in the video" and ensuring that it is a diverse recruiting pool. This may sound like I'm over-doing it to some, but I do believe the intentionality is crucial—or it doesn't happen. Again some of this is building the network of relationships so you know someone to actually put in the video... it can't just be arbitrary. But it does need to be intentional.

Who is coming? – Finally, I do want to look at the crowd that is coming and question it. For many of us, we want to start here—those of us leading churches want "our congregation to be more diverse" or we want "the church to be less segregated on Sundays." I've found that I need to engage in the previous three questions for many years before pushing on this fourth question. But I do need to push on this one

as well. Demographics matter--if my church doesn't "look" like my community, well then there are likely deep-seated reasons for it.

While the above three questions are the place I want to start. I can't stop there and hope everything works out. I long for the Church to look more like my community, and more like Heaven, at the same time. If it doesn't then I need to step back and do some analysis, even focus groups, informal polls and even formal polls to find out why there is a persistent problem. In my fifth local church we had a century-long reputation problem where the poor, the uneducated, and the non-white felt they could not go to our church. I'm here to say that while it is a massive struggle, you can overcome all these barriers. (I might also say that the *ethnic* barrier was in some ways not as difficult as the *economic* one, and not nearly as hard as the *educational* barrier, but that's a story for another day.)

I have not mastered all the above. Certainly I am making prejudiced decisions all the time that I'm unaware of. But I find that I can make better decisions, have healthier relationships, and lead my organization in a way that continues the struggle against sin and makes us more like Christ in the above ways. I know that I have some big challenges in that while our board is very diverse (compared to previous years it's a massive change) our cabinet is all white, and our regional leaders (of which there are 32) are all white males over 40 years of age. It takes time to improve on all these levels, and in many ways the top one is the hardest--but I do think by starting there it helps everything else start to fall into place (after all, once there is more diversity in power, then you can leverage power itself for this cause.)

In the last paragraph of *The Letter* Dr. King summed up the goal, one that is not yet achieved, but for which I continue the struggle, and I hope you do too:

"Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty."

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

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Finding the New Fights

We would too often like to freeze our Black leaders in Star-Wars-style carbonite, making them our own "Han Solo of 1968," rather than letting them live on in their own path. We do this with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself. Since he was killed in his prime we can think that he would have continued to fight the same fight in the same way. But we see by reading his works and speeches that he was already working for many other oppressed people, the poor in particular. One of the ways I can learn from *The Letter* is to unfreeze MLK and let his movement live on again in my heart by finding the new fights.

I'll return to this thought at the end of this, but for now let me say that I think that *The Letter* inspires me to think about the cultural evils all around me that make

things “okay” that are simply not “okay.” Many of our cultural evils are perpetuated in a way that have little to do with the law, and are instead about just plain old sin. Around the world people are always inventing ways to oppress other people, or they are resurrecting old patterns of oppression (the history of Afghanistan is a case-study in the latter.) I see people actively working for women’s rights and against human trafficking. I see people alert to new signs of ethnic cleansing, and others working for the rights of indigenous peoples, or the rights of children (including those children who are still in the womb). Multi-national corporations and the ubiquitous nature of the Internet have both caused us to ask human rights questions that cause many to find new fights.

Cultural Evil

In each of the above cases there is a new topography to evil, even if there is a longer history and track record of oppression. What is not new is that those in power will often oppress those without it. Power corrupts, and in systems where power becomes more and more absolute the tendency is for the oppression to be absolutely insurmountable without someone else with power fighting against it. Whether it be the power of communication, government, community mobilization, networking, or even scholarship: we must use our power to speak truth into the vacuum cultural evils create. I believe each new generation has within it an inner light to find these new fights and to fight them valiantly, if we can cultivate it.

As a Christian I believe the Church is the greatest power to fight these evils. However all too often the Church looks the other way (as it too often did in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s) with only the more active Churches and Christian leaders as exceptions. At other times the Church is actually complicit in the cultural evils itself, as it was in American Slavery from the beginning and right up until the Civil War, with only a few abolitionist movements (like the Wesleysans) as exceptions. But when the church is at its best (as it was among abolitionist churches and civil rights movement churches) there is no more powerful force on earth for change.

In part because of the example of *The Letter*, I feel compelled to find the new fights that come our way as evil reinvents itself in every age.

Unjust Laws

Sometimes a cultural evil, like racism, becomes so embedded in our countries that the laws themselves begin to reflect these sins. When that happens, it is incumbent upon us to work to change the laws. I am a law-abiding American citizen, but at times I must yield to a higher law, and I must be loyal to my higher citizenship in Heaven. But how do I make these decisions on principle and with accountable authority, without becoming a relativist who makes up my own rubric for right and wrong.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave us three invaluable principles in *The Letter* for making these decisions.

1) Unjust Laws Lack Harmony with God’s Moral Law

“How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: ‘An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.’”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

This principle has fallen out of fashion today. People are uncomfortable with the idea that our secular human laws in our nations are “rooted in eternal law.” But King’s activism is deeply rooted in scripture and the truth of God. He, like Aquinas before him, philosophically believed that these laws can be affirmed in natural law all around us, the way the universe works, because God, as Creator, has embedded his truth into the laws of the universe itself. Sometimes the laws of the land lack this congruity with the Truth... they no longer harmonize with God’s moral law, and instead become dissonant chords in our system of laws. When they do we must change them.

2) Unjust Laws Falsely Degrade Some and Inflate Others

“Any law that uplifts the human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

When we find that we have codified in our laws something that degrades the actual value of a human life we must overthrow these laws. Human personality is not just a Psyche 101 concept for us to throw around as a freshman. Instead, human personality is the *Imago Dei*, and a crime against even one person made in the image of God is a crime against not only humanity, but a crime against the creator of it. Laws must uplift and protect this humanity. In this sense a theologian should be the most active human rights activist. Knowing God should inspire in us a devotion to protect his creations—particularly the one that is made in the Image of God himself: men and women.

3) Unjust Laws Institutionalize Oppression of One Over Another

“An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

When we find that our laws themselves are crafted to protect the power of the powerful, to restrict its access perpetually, so that a caste system of ethnicity,

economics, or education is in place, then we are beholden to overthrow that system. When our cultural evils make it “okay” to allow a majority to make a minority “fall in line” and “keep quiet” then we are institutionalizing our oppression, and all the calls to be “law-abiding” themselves fall on my deaf ears, because the system, the law itself, is broken. We must in these times follow King’s example from *The Letter* and quote our prophets in Scripture, share our philosopher’s and theologian’s call for reason, revive the best of each of our religious traditions, and even share stories from our own experience that penetrate the hearts if not the minds of our foes. By following this pattern we can change even the laws of the most powerful countries that have ever ruled this earth—even the United States of America. It has been done before, and we can do it again. The Church will rise when it must.

I have been deeply impressed with those current civil rights leaders who are working on things such as Immigration Reform in the United States. In particular I’ve been impressed with African-Americans who are working for people not like them, who don’t speak their language as well, or who look different from them. Regardless of whether your views match mine on immigration, you must admit that it is honorable to see these black leaders stick to their human rights principles, rather than merely sticking to their faction’s guns. It is fascinating to see these leaders “unfreeze the carbonite” and lead on principle. This sometimes makes people uncomfortable. We sometimes would rather that African-American leaders “play a role” and only “represent their own.” This is its own kind of discrimination—one where blacks are elevated in our minds from before—but not elevated to the place of determining their own scale of activism, or to choose what matters deeply as a matter of biblical faith to them.

Instead, we can unfreeze our conception of Civil Rights and unlock them from the 60s. The Civil Rights Movement is alive and well in our hearts today as we continue to find new fights and to fight them as Dr. King would even today.

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Be Ever Vigilant

A fifth way to respond to *The Letter* is to be ever vigilant. Yes, I must start by *celebrating* and then *confessing*, which leads to *continuing the struggle* and *finding the new fights*. But these four responses lead me into an overall mode of operating, which I would call “being ever vigilant” as the fifth and final way to respond, among many others that might be suggested beyond mine.

Prophets and Prophecies, Kings and Kingdoms

One who is ever vigilant on the issue of race and injustice is a person who understands that prejudice is not a sin that can be extricated from the Church and society as we might put behind us some primitive squared-version of a wheel. Sin and righteousness do not build in ages like science and technology, but must be forged and purified anew in each age. Each generation, each human being, has its own propensity to prejudge people for the way they look—for the way they are different than themselves. And each government, each law, each politician—each

person with each of the particular powers they might amass unto themselves—each of these as they rise and fall has a propensity to protect the powerful and oppress the weak.

The prophets of the Bible recurrently spoke to injustice, even though they preached to scores of kings and courts, dozens of generations and peoples, in differing centuries of time and age. As new kingdoms and generations rise so are new prophets and prophecies required for one thing remains the same: the propensity of those in power to oppress.

Cycles of Sin

So we must not assume that “all this is behind us” but instead can live in a healthy tension. The sins of racism and injustice are much like the sins of lust and adultery, in their practical challenge. Every new marriage is threatened by these sins, and we do not assume that we “got that sin licked” in the last generation. Instead, we must have a culture of awareness where we strategically aim at the sin, and systemically support new marriages in the struggle. A similar vigilant culture is needed to keep the creative tension alive is needed in terms of racism and injustice.

Martin Luther King in *The Letter* explained his own view of this tension by speaking of a philosopher who informed his methods:

“Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we 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.”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

This creative analysis requires constant vigilance so that an honest tension can be cultivated. Of course the tension is not in truth “created” so much as “exposed.” He went on to say,

“...we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive... Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

So, we must continue on in constant vigilance in these matters. This is uncomfortable for us. We who have been a part of an oppressed people and likewise we who are guilty of complicit actions within a system of oppression would like to find a day where this can be “put behind us.” However, the ministry of reconciliation is not one of forgetfulness, it is one of forgiveness. What is restored by Christ is not blindly recreated into it once was, like some kind of sci-fi memory wipe and time-travel. Instead, what is restored is even better than it once was because of the

presence and transformative power of the Holy Spirit. As he has done with Christ himself, the Father somehow makes the one more beautiful and more holy that borne the scars. They are not erased, but instead the story of the scars receives part of the glory itself. This is why scarred hands and feet, pierced sides, crowns of thorns, and crosses themselves are our symbols. The scars somehow become sacred.

The Giant of Respectability

There is an enemy to this restoration-targeted reconciliation. The great foe that fights against allowing tension to be raised is the grand giant of respectability. I have seen this giant rule supreme even in our day. Our churches and denominations and communities don't want a hint of tension to remain. It is bad public relations. It is, in an odd way: politically incorrect. While one might roll their eyes or even shout down someone using a racially-loaded word in a different kind of political correctness, but they also will also roll their eyes or edge out of leadership someone who brings up the issue of race in a way that threatens the status quo. Someone that points out the tension in our grand game of respectability and points out that the emperor has no clothes is relegated to peripheral status, or pushed out completely.

I have felt this pressure from the giant of respectability. Others have privately cautioned me from making a big deal about race and injustice. Some have advised of the threat it can have on career, of the limiting future in people becoming what Dr. King suggested are "tension gadflies." These tension gadflies are not asked to take the microphone, tension gadflies are not appointed to high posts, and tension gadflies are definitely not elected to anything political (whether in government of the country or of the Church, which both have their political realities, no matter what anyone says).

The thinking here is to consider how our elders view us. Usually the emperor with no clothes is older than you, and often the generation before us feels more suppressed guilt over matters, and they read between the lines of the critique as being "about them" (it is not necessarily true, expect that they have lived longer so have had more time to amass a track record.) So we are advised that our elders would be "embarrassed" by amplifying these tensions, and to diminish them accordingly.

What's more, our peers push us to "focus on more important things." The subtle point here is that "racism and injustice is wrong but there are bigger, more missional issues at stake." Elevating the tension on race now, they say, will only distract us from more mission critical matters.

I understand that we must respect our elders, and I hope my critique is never unduly focused on them. Each generation has sins to atone for, and I am not one to believe that any generation is more sinful than another (although certain sins ebb and flow in their cultural acceptance). I also feel that my peers are right that racism and injustice are not the only issues today (although I disagree that it is not mission-critical and will only say that it is merely among the mission-critical issue of our day.)

However, I would say that my hope is not to make primary how my elders or peers view my actions—but instead to wonder how will my children view my actions? How will my children consider my generation as a whole? What pervasive

culturally accepted actions will they intuitively know we are guilty of, with the new perspective passing decades always seem to grant? My inaction, my silence, may be seen by my children as a different kind of extremism than one the “respectable middle” and the giant of respectability tries to silence—a kind that is all the more insidious for its acceptance in our society.

An Extremist for Love

King spoke to this conception of extremism and respectability so excellently in his Letter. He says that he was “initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist” but over time the moniker grew on him as he considered that all those he admired most were considered extremists, starting with Christ:

“Was not Jesus an extremist for love: ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.’”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

After this King marches through litany of extremists who shaped our doctrine, starting with Amos, “an extremist for justice,” reminding us of his refrain, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” Then Paul: “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” Then Luther: “Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God.” And even Bunyan: “I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.”

As I look to be ever vigilant in response to *The Letter*, I wonder the following: What is the Christian faith if not a counter-cultural movement that calls us to question the overall beliefs and preconceived notions of the larger culture in the world, or our country? What is following Christ but not a humbling, unrespectable, stooping motion of taking up our own cross, potentially being persecuted by a world hell-bent on perpetuating the status quo over all else.

I am reminded, when reading *The Letter*, that for the world, change is always the greatest foe. But for us, a status quo of sin causes us to be ever vigilant, and to embrace change. *Change* is just another way to spell *Christ*, or the *Church* that embodies his mission. Where there is Christ, there is change of heart; where there is Church, there is change of culture. Where there is no change of heart, we search for Christ and cannot find him; where there is no change of culture, we seek the true Church and do not find her either.

So, the final way I must respond to the Letter is to be an extremist who is ever vigilant about my own prejudice, and the racism and injustice that power so blithely enables without conscience. I must be on constant vigilant watch in my choice between the two extremisms:

“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?”

- Martin Luther King in *The Letter*

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*All references to *The Letter* are all to *The Letter from Birmingham Jail* by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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