

White Clergymen from Birmingham, "Letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."

Brief Background: During the civil rights era in the United States, a group of white clergymen wrote a letter to The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. encouraging him to withdraw his support for peaceful demonstrations. This letter represented popular opinion at the time, especially among the white majority. Dr. King responded with his now famous letter from Birmingham City Jail, where he writes, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Reproduced here is the clergymen's letter to Dr. King, with a link to Dr. King's response.

Letter to Martin Luther King

A Group of Clergymen
April 12, 1963

We clergymen are among those who, in January, issued "an Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense," in dealing with racial problems in Alabama. We expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts, but urged that decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed.

Since that time there has been some evidence of increased forbearance and a willingness to face facts. Responsible citizens have undertaken to work on various problems which cause racial friction and unrest. In Birmingham, recent public events have given indication that we all have opportunity for a new constructive and realistic approach to racial problems.

However, we are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.

We agree rather with certain local Negro leadership which has called for honest and open negotiation of racial issues in our area. And we believe this kind of facing of issues can best be accomplished by citizens of our own metropolitan area, white and Negro, meeting with their knowledge and experiences of the local situation. All of us need to face that responsibility and find proper channels for its accomplishment.

Just as we formerly pointed out that "hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions," we also point out that such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham.

We commend the community as a whole, and the local news media and law enforcement officials in particular, on the calm manner in which these demonstrations have been handled. We urge the public to continue to show restraint should the demonstrations continue, and the law enforcement officials to remain calm and continue to protect our city from violence.

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We further strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.

Signed by:

C.C.J. CARPENTER, D.D., LL.D., Bishop of Alabama.

JOSEPH A. DURICK, D.D., Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham

Rabbi MILTON L. GRAFMAN, Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, Alabama

Bishop PAUL HARDIN, Bishop of the Alabama-West Florida Conference of the Methodist Church

Bishop NOLAN B. HARMON, Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the Methodist Church

GEORGE M. MURRAY, D.D., LL.D., Bishop Coadjutor, Episcopal Diocese of Alabama

EDWARD V. RAMAGE, Moderator, Synod of the Alabama Presbyterian Church in the United States

EARL STALLINGS, Pastors, First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama

Vocabulary

Determine the meaning of each word below from how it is used in the letter. This technique is called "inferring" the meaning from the context. If you cannot infer the meaning, look up the word in a dictionary.

- appeal
- clergymen
- convictions
- demonstrations
- forbearance
- metropolitan
- resolution
- urge
- restraint
- Episcopal
- Presbyterian

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Thinking Critically

Answer each question as completely as you can, using well-formed sentences. Although there is no "correct" answer, please be sure to support your answer with evidence from the text.

1. Why do you think that the clergymen write that "decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed"?
2. Do the clergymen believe that progress is being made to achieve racial equality in Alabama? What evidence do you have in the letter?
3. What do the clergymen ask "our own Negro community" to do?
4. Instead of street demonstrations, what venue do the clergymen think citizens should use to resolve issues of racial intolerance?
5. What effect do you think that the clergymen wish to achieve in commending "the community as a whole, and the local news media and law enforcement officials in particular" on the way that the demonstrations have been handled?

Writing Assignment

In his famous letter, Dr. King writes, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." Write a 500-word essay where you use your knowledge of world events, both current and historical, to support Dr. King's assertion. You may use material from the clergymen's letter as a springboard to your argument.

Click on the link below to see the complete text of Dr. Martin Luther King's famous letter.

http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/liberation_curriculum/pdfs/letterfrombirmingham_wwcw.pdf