

MLK and the Curse of 'Moderation'

From the Archive: When Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. went to jail to focus national attention on the injustice of segregation, he was stung by criticism from Christian clergy who feared upsetting the status quo and urged "moderation," prompting his historic rejoinder from the Birmingham jail, as Rev. Howard Bess recalled in 2014.

By Rev. Howard Bess (Originally published on Jan. 24, 2014)

Martin Luther King Jr. was my contemporary, a person whom I supported in his demand for full inclusion of people of color in the life of America. Yet, as that history played out, I did not fully realize the greatness of King and the significance of the events of the late Fifties and the early Sixties.

As we look back on those events, there are an endless number of reasons why Dr. King's statue stands on the Tidal Basin across from the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC, and why King's birthday is a national holiday.

I have read his writings, and his "I Have a Dream" speech is etched on my heart and mind. But I believe his letter to clergy, "[Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)," is his greatest communication articulating his cause and one of the great documents of American history.

I marvel at the document because it was written from a jail cell where King had no access to reference materials. The date of the letter was April 16, 1963, when the modern civil rights movement for people of color was still relatively young, but the movement was becoming stronger and the opposition was becoming more entrenched.

The letter came from what was stored in King's maturing mind. He wrote on whatever scraps of paper he could find, addressing the letter to "My Dear Fellow Clergymen," a group of clergy who had written a letter to King to discourage his coming to Birmingham. These clergy counseled patience and moderation and questioned why King, as an "outsider" had come to their Alabama community.

In the letter, King wrote, "While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities 'unwise and untimely.'" Then, he responded by saying that Negroes had waited long enough and that "moderation" was not useful in righting wrongs of segregation that had been inflicted on African-Americans over generations:

"I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord'

far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.”

In the letter, King called not for moderation or patience but for non-violent and peaceful extremism, arguing that clergymen , the very people who should be at the forefront calling for justice in the name of Jesus, were betraying the Christian gospel by calling for moderation and gradualism. King wrote:

“We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights.”

Disappointing Churches

King’s letter moves on to express his “disappointment with the churches.” King was an ordained Baptist minister, the son and grandson of Baptist ministers. He had been nurtured and educated by churches and their institutions. He loved the churches, knew church history, and knew that movements to reform society and to deliver society from injustice many times had come from churches and clergy. He wrote:

“I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. 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 Counciler 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.’

“Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

"I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

"When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

"In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

"I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings.

"Over and over I have found myself asking: 'What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?'

"Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love."

Pinnacle of a Message

Most reviewers of the life of Martin Luther King Jr. see his "I Have a Dream" speech as the high point of his career. I beg to differ. Birmingham and the letter may have been the pinnacle of his career as he confronted not simply society but Christian churches and their clergy.

The Letter from Birmingham Jail was published in leading Christian publications and in the nation's most read newspapers. His confrontation with moderation was blunt yet gracious. Segregation and injustice were not his primary targets, rather he turned his searchlight of truth-telling on all those who took refuge in moderation.

Not many of those clergy in Birmingham may have understood the significance of King's rejoinder, but a large part of the nation took note. Many believe that it was the Letter from Birmingham Jail that pushed President John F. Kennedy to initiate civil rights legislation.

Moderation in the face of injustice has been the great disease of Christian churches. The vast majority of Christian clergy are hiding behind the mission of saving souls while ignoring the social teachings of Jesus, the one they claim to serve as their Lord. These clergymen play the game of advocating the cause of social justice but only with great moderation.

Justice was a centerpiece of the life work of Jesus. As Americans we confess that justice is for all, even in the NFL. Yet, "moderates" will never make the dream of justice-for-all a reality. It turns out that the path to hell is not paved with good intentions; it is paved with moderation.

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