

CIVIL RIGHTS

Three Views

Consider the following questions as you read.

1. What criticisms did the Alabama clergyman make of King's approach to advancing the cause of black civil rights? What approach did the Clergymen support? Why?
2. King says he stands between two opposing forces in the Black Community. What were they? Was his characterization of these forces a fair one? Explain.
3. Why did he reject the Clergymen's position and advocate Non-violent direct action?
4. According to King, What is the difference between a just law and an unjust law? He offers a few definitions – which do you think is the best? Are there laws today that fit MLK's definition of an unjust law? How would breaking these laws help force change
5. How did Stokely Carmichael's approach to advancing the cause of black civil rights differ from those of Martin Luther King Jr.? (Explain THREE differences)
6. How did Carmichael respond to the charge that "black separatism" is a racist ideology? Do you agree with his argument? Explain.

A Group of Birmingham Clergymen – Letter to Martin Luther King, 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.

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:
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"Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr.

I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self respect and a sense of 'somebodiness' that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle-class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence ... 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.

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. When you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; --then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.

Now, what is the difference between the two? 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. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.

Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself.

One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

Stokely Carmichael, Leader of Student National Coordinating Committee, 1966.

The adoption of the concept of Black Power is one of the most legitimate and healthy developments in American politics and race relations in our time. . . . It is a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. . . . The concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks. . . . Black people must lead and run their own organizations. . . . Black people must come together and do things for themselves. They must achieve self-identity and self-determination in order to have their daily needs met.

Some observers have labeled those who advocate Black Power as racists; they have said that the call for self-identification and self-determination is "racism in reverse" or "black supremacy." This is a deliberate and absurd lie. Racism is not merely exclusion on the basis of race but exclusion for the purpose of subjugating or maintaining subjugation. The goal of the racists is to keep black people on the bottom. . . . The goal of black self-determination and black self identity – Black Power – is full participation in the decision-making processes affecting the lives of black people, and recognition of the virtues in themselves as black people. . . .

Next we must deal with the term "integration. This concept is based on the assumption that there is nothing of value in the black community and that little of value could be created among black people. . . . The racial and cultural personality of the black community must be preserved and that community must win its freedom while preserving its cultural integrity.

. . . Those of us who advocate Black Power are quite clear in our own minds that a "non-violent" approach to civil rights is an approach black people cannot afford and a luxury white people do not deserve. White people must be made to understand that they must stop messing with black people, or the blacks will fight back!