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“A Letter from Birmingham Jail” - An Analysis

In “A Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr. believes that the demonstrations in Birmingham from his people are justified. He employs a method of thoughtfully dismantling the points of criticism towards the civil rights movement from the clergy leadership in Alabama who had lettered to him.

Firstly, King addresses the condemnation of the Birmingham demonstrations. He immediately counters by highlighting how the city’s actions - either shunning agreements with the civil rights leadership, or denying them altogether - ultimately forced them to employ civil disobedience. He references multiple past attempts at negotiation, noting their failures, as well as citing intentional postponements for the sake of not interfering with elections. He complements these points with the idea that creating tension is very effective at bringing about negotiation, referencing the beliefs of Socrates regarding tension in the mind and change (King). Finally, to explain why his people could not wait to demonstrate any longer, he employs a myriad of anecdotes about the countless acts of violence and experiences of insecurity and suffering that his people have endured for many years. Among these anecdotes are the abuse and lynching of colored people, and the struggle of children of color to understand the reasoning behind their exclusions. He asserts that freedom is “never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed,” hence his people’s swift action upon the election of the new administration (King).

Secondly, King addresses the concerns about the lawbreaking of his people. He cites the difference between just and unjust laws, defining the latter in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas as a law that degrades human personality (King). He also illustrates the definition further with various examples, such as an unjust law creating an “I-it” relationship between its enforcers and recipients; an unjust law legalizing a difference that is unbinding on the lawmaker; and an unjust law inflicting on a minority that did not have any right to vote on it. He carries on, saying that segregation gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and vice versa for the segregated. Additionally, he brings up those in history who had also practiced civil disobedience: the men from Nebuchadnezzar, the early Christians, and those who participated in the Boston Tea Party (King). For these reasons, he asserts that him and his people’s violation of the law is justified.

Third, King reflects on the opinion that his people’s activity in Birmingham is extreme. He counters by laying out that he stands between two forces in his community; one of complacency whose people have adjusted to segregation, and the other of hatred who have come dangerously close to advocating violence (King). He conveys that the nonviolent practices of his community have acted as a vent for his people’s frustrations, and that if it weren’t for these practices, their emotions would be released and expressed in violent ways. After this clarification, King expresses his resulting feeling about the term “extremist,” first illustrating how various historical figures were in fact extremists: Jesus, an extremist for love; Amos, an extremist for justice; Paul, an extremist for the Christian gospel; Martin Luther, a plain extremist; John Bunyan, an extremist for his conscience; Abraham Lincoln, an extremist for freedom; and Thomas Jefferson, an extremist for equality. He conveys that it doesn’t matter whether one is an extremist, but what they are an extremist for, having shared that he had gained some satisfaction

from being termed as an extremist. He closes his point by saying that the world is perhaps in need of creative extremists (King).

Fourth, King addresses the church, first commending its few acts of support for his people in the form of writings and marches. Afterwards, King expresses his disappointment with the church. Positioning himself as someone who was raised by the church, he highlights either the dismissal of his people's causes or the lack of explicit advocacy for said causes in terms of morality. He reflects on the past Christians, who suffered for their beliefs, and their transformative, agitative efforts - he compares this to the present-day church, which is a weak, uncertain defender of the status quo, and which consoles its communities by sanctioning the state of things as-is (King). Because of the church's current state, King surmises that he must turn to the inner spiritual church as hope for change, although once more commending the actions of the few from the church who have personally stood up for his people's cause (King).

Throughout his letter, King uses different voices while conveying his points. He uses a more conciliatory tone when addressing his people's usage of direct action, whether laws are just or unjust, and the church's issues, and a more commanding tone when addressing the timeliness of his people's demonstrations, the regard of his people as extremists, and the precipitation of violence from his people's actions. He is firm and assertive when providing reasoning for the actions of his people or defense against claims, while being more reserved when describing actions or ideas themselves or the states of things as they are.

Overall, King provides a highly comprehensive and all-encompassing response to the clergymen, employing various literary methods like anecdotes and historical references while also using voice to punctuate his points. Through his methods, he assures that his people's

actions are justified, closing with a hope that the dark clouds of prejudice will soon come to pass (King).

Works Cited

King, Martin Luther. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." *Kingpapers.org, Stanford University The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*,
kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail.