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Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” shows that it is faith that drives his hunger for justice; as such, his use of biblical references not only aide in effective reproach of the reader, the clergy, for its apathy, hypocrisy and close-mindedness, but also reveal King’s humble intentions for doing so.This letter repeatedly touches on the biblical significance of extremism, and the “moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws” (King Jr., “Letter”).

King did not advocate for blind lawlessness, but says that one must do so humbly with the intention to “arouse the conscience of the community” and out of the “highest respect for the law” (“Letter”). In addition to bringing awareness, one must have the have a “willingness to accept the penalty” for the glory of God (King Jr., “Letter”). He uses biblical history to further his point in the next paragraph, regarding the “early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and…chopping blocks,” to fulfill the call of extremism set forth (King Jr., “Letter”). King often refers to Apostle Paul, an “extremist for the Christian Gospel” who was punished for this same call (imprisoned for much of his biblical writings) and, of course, here is King himself, currently jailed for the charge of “parading without a permit” (“Letter”). Furthermore, Jesus was crucified for disobeying unjust laws (on the surface), but how does his “devotion to God’s will [precipitate] the evil act of crucifixion” (King Jr., “Letter”)?

It seems that King uses these examples as evidence to show that the church has lost sight of this call—being “caught up by the Zeitgeist”—and has complacently started serving man before God, defying the biblical first commandment (“Letter”; Exodus 20:3). He also refers to 1 Corinthians 12, calling the church “the body of Christ”, and rebukes the clergy for allowing the body to be damaged by “social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists” (King Jr., “Letter”).

King believes that this “social issue” is so relatable to the Bible, that for one to disagree that the local church should be involved means that they must practice a completely different religion altogether (“Letter”). As this letter King writes is ultimately a response to his “fellow clergymen,” who have criticized his actions and even his presence in Birmingham, his use of biblical references allows him to uniquely relate to the clergy’s own beliefs. In this way, King can convince them that they are, in fact, not on opposing sides of the present conflict, and he does so with humility and truth, not just argumentativeness. To increase the validity of his biblical argument, King ensures his response comes from a place of love and humility, as a “fellow clergyman and a Christian brother” and not as the opposition (“Letter”).

Work Cited

King Jr., Martin Luther. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” <http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html>. Accessed 28 Dec 2016.