

Letter from Jail

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IN THE SPRING of 1963 Cleo Kennedy, a soloist at St. Luke's Church in Birmingham, began her a cappella rendition of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."¹ The slow, lullaby-like tempo of the most famous of all spirituals fit perfectly with the quiet joy of its lyrics. The resplendent expression of a calm expectation to reach heaven, "Swing Low" is a perfect song of religious contemplation. No one would ever tinker with it. But someone did. Without warning, organist Carlton Reese and his choir dove into Kennedy's solo and began belting "Rock Me, Lord," a pounding, extremely upbeat variation of "Swing Low." The pews began to quiver as Reese's white-hot solo proved beyond doubt that every jazz pianist should have played the organ instead. Sopranos leapt boldly into the few spaces the skittering organist left open. And the low, steady bass notes riveted the building to its foundation, which it threatened to desert.

The crowd shouted, clapped, and stomped, celebrating not only the heavenly music, but also their own earthly crusade to eliminate segregation from their city, a bastion of American apartheid.

King stepped up to the pulpit, into the excitement generated by sublime music and by a grassroots protest that had galvanized the attention of the world. He addressed the church in placid, measured tones, transforming his followers' zeal into calm as he prepared them to face the wrath of the city. He and they realized that Sheriff Bull Connor would continue to confront peaceful marchers with powerful fire hoses and angry police dogs. But he insisted that, though greeted with dogs and hatred, protestors should remain nonviolent and patiently accept jail sentences for themselves and their children.²

Nonviolence was finally winning the Battle of Birmingham. King and SCLC had already dispatched twenty-five hundred people to jail, for the first time meeting their objective of literally filling the jails.

The Birmingham movement gained the sympathy of millions of Americans, who were horrified by police violence, especially when applied to innocent black children. But police brutality in Birmingham and elsewhere did not automatically signify that segregation was evil. The public needed to understand police barbarism as symptomatic and symbolic of an entire racist system. King and the movement had to convince America that Connor was no aberration, that every-

¹Listen to Carawan, *Birmingham*.

²For King's oration, listen to *Birmingham*. King distinguishes the three types of love, as decried by the Greek words *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. This discussion has become his standard analysis of love, which he borrowed from Fosdick's *On Being Fit* (6–7) and in "Pilgrimage," "Loving Your Enemies," and elsewhere. He relied on it so often that "there were few who followed [King's] career who have not heard his favorite discourse on the meaning and significance of *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*" (David Lewis 44).

day segregation was just as horrific as Connor's police. By sacrificing themselves to the hoses and dogs, King's activists essentially claimed that Connor's violence represented the hidden, daily violence of racism.

Just as police brutality served as an apt symbol for the less dramatic, quotidian evil of segregation, so did jail. As they presented themselves for jail, African Americans in effect argued that jail symbolized racism.³ They could stand jail because segregation already locked them in jail. If segregation was already a prison, then why not go behind bars?

Providing this equation explicitly in "Shattered Dreams," King equates Paul's suffering in prison with the experience of enslaved and segregated blacks. He argues that African Americans in "the prison of segregation" recapitulate Paul's experiences in prison.⁴ King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" implicitly offers the same comparison: life in jail matches life under segregation.

King could provide this equation because his conception of religious leadership came from the Old Testament prophets, the Apostle Paul, and the black church. Early in this letter he compares himself to the eighth-century Old Testament prophets and to Paul.⁵ His readers realized that Paul was often incarcerated and wrote letters from jail. Like the prophets, Paul was simultaneously a preacher, a theologian, and a disturber of the peace. And Paul made no distinction between his sermons, his theology, and his letter-writing. Refusing to cultivate an elite, he preferred to evangelize anyone who would listen.

Long before King was born, black churches often insisted on vesting in a single person the duties of theologian, preacher, and activist. In many black communities, mastering all these roles has been almost a requirement for becoming an authoritative religious leader. Until the advent of black theology about the time of King's death, blacks rarely recognized theology as something distinct from sermons. Believing that the brightest and best-educated people should instruct whole congregations, African-American leaders have historically gained authority by combining the roles of expert and public speaker. The finest black theologians—Richard Allen, Henry Highland Garnet, Vernon Johns, C. L. Franklin, and others—delivered theology through their sermons, not by way of erudite theological prose. They also engaged in protest; indeed, their church "was born as a protest movement."⁶ And, while its impulse to protest has sometimes remained dormant, the impulse has never died.

By contrast, in the first half of this century liberal white Protestants treated sermons, theology, and social protest as discrete concerns. No one regarded Fosdick, Buttrick, and Hamilton as theologians. Nor were they activists of any note. Though Tillich often preached, his reputation rests on his theological volumes, which he clearly valued more than his sermons. Though Niebuhr ventured across the tidy demarcations of religious roles, he, like Tillich, regarded his

³I thank John Doeblér for this observation.

⁴See King, Jr., *Strength* 83.

⁵For the Pauline qualities of "Letter," see Snow.

⁶Kelly Miller Smith 72.

theology—not his sermons—as the most important expression of his thought. In fact, the extremely prolific Niebuhr never published a collection of sermons and never used theology to organize a movement.⁷ Like other white Protestants, King's professors regarded theology, homiletics, and social ethics as separate subjects to be taught in separate classes.

While many would rank King as the greatest American preacher of the century, one could easily wonder how he could become a stellar homilist and essayist while also directing a social revolution. He managed to become both the most accomplished preacher and the most successful reformer of the century partly because he did not begin the process of fusing the roles of preacher, theologian, and activist. Unlike white religious leaders, he preached by protesting, protested by preaching, and wrote theology by stepping into a jail cell. His successful theology consists of his sermons, speeches, civil rights essays, and political career—not his formal theological work. Had he accepted the white division of theology, homiletics, and politics, he never would have gone to jail to gain the authority to speak. By rejecting white models, he achieved the apotheosis of his own community's understanding of religious leadership, an understanding the nation came to cherish.

Nowhere is this black conception of theology more evident than in "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Along with the Sermon on the Porch, the essay is more completely inseparable from the civil rights movement than any other example of King's discourse. Indeed a better match between words and deeds is difficult to imagine. King perfectly tailored his letter to the particulars of Birmingham in 1963, including its recent mayoral election and an unsolved rash of bombings. The principles outlined in "Letter" mandated his trip to jail, and a stay in jail mandated the explanation supplied by "Letter." Getting arrested set the stage for "Letter," "Letter" set the stage for future arrests.

Yet, as King masterfully performed the simultaneous roles of preacher, theologian, and activist, he wrote an essay that, unlike his other discourse, actually reflects his study of Euro-American philosophy and theology. "Letter" also manifests the powerful and more familiar influences of the black folk pulpit, *Christian Century*, Fosdick, Wofford, and two other religious writers. All these influences converge in this extraordinary essay.

Although King's epistolary essay was inspired by Paul, his more immediate stimulant was *Christian Century*.⁸ In 1959, six months after joining the edito-

⁷Unhappy with what his sermons might look like in print, Niebuhr revised a fairly small number of them into "sermonic essays," which were homilies shaped into miniature theological excursions.

⁸Ostensibly "Letter" is King's response to eight moderate clergy, who wrote not a letter but a statement for a local newspaper, directing their remarks *not* to King, but to "our own white and Negro citizenry" (Snow 321). For that reason, the clergy did not invent the context for "Letter." Together with the editor of *Christian Century*, King invented the context. The comment by the clergy gave King an ostensible context that has been widely mistaken for the real context.

rial staff of the journal, he informed its editor that he wanted to write "occasional articles and letters" that could reach "the Protestant leadership of our country."⁹ The editor agreed that his readership would appreciate "an occasional personal letter which you could write."¹⁰ Six months later the editor gave more explicit instructions, telling King and his other editors-at-large to write Christmas letters "in such a form that they can actually be sent to the people to whom they are addressed as well as appearing in the columns of the magazine."¹¹ The recipients responded with a set of public letters printed in the Christmas issue of the journal. Like "Letter," these letters ostensibly focused on their real-life addressees but actually on readers of *Christian Century*. Like "Letter," some of them combined a cordial and respectful tone with forceful criticism of their addressees. Although King did not write a public letter on this occasion, he did so a few years later in Birmingham.

Ostensibly serving as King's response to eight moderate clergy, "Letter" first surfaced in *Christian Century*, *Liberation*, and *Christianity and Crisis*—three left-of-center journals—and in pamphlets disseminated by the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and another leftist, pacifist organization, the American Friends Service Committee.¹² Soon afterwards other readers encountered King's epistle in *The Progressive*, *Ebony*, and other liberal periodicals. Publication in the *New York Post* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* further expanded King's readership. (He claimed that "nearly a million copies . . . have been widely circulated in churches of most of the major denominations."¹³) He also installed the instantly popular essay as the centerpiece for *Why We Can't Wait*, his longer account of the Birmingham movement. 15

Given that King wrote "Letter" for *Christian Century* and other left-of-center outlets, one can say that its original and primary audience was not the ostensible audience of eight moderate clergy. Nor was it other moderate readers. Instead, King carefully crafted a letter that could actually be mailed to its addressees while engaging the readers of *Christian Century* and other liberal Protestants. The progressive ministers and laity who raved about King's sermons at Cathedral of St. John, Riverside Church, the Chicago Sunday Evening Club, and elsewhere were the same people who subscribed to *Christian Century*. Because this journal had promulgated racial equality not merely for years, but for several decades prior to "Letter," the vast majority of its subscribers wholeheartedly agreed with King's attack on segregation long before he wrote his essay. Had the editors of the journal failed to sympathize with King, they would not have published "Pilgrimage" several years prior to "Letter." Nor would they have welcomed him as an editor-at-large every year from 1958 until a year after the publication of "Letter." Equally sympathetic were those who read "Letter"

⁹King, Jr. Letter to Harold Fey, 30 March 1959, KC BU.

¹⁰See Harold Fey, letter to King, Jr., 11 May 1959, KC BU.

¹¹Harold Fey, letter to King, Jr., 23 November 1959, KC BU.

¹²American Friends Service Committee is an arm of the Quakers.

¹³King, Jr., "Playboy" 351.

in other liberal forums. Although the essay eventually reached large numbers of moderates, King's main purpose was to convert the converted and reinforce their earlier support. He carefully preached to the choir, targeting an audience of liberals by asking them to invoke the role of moderates. The essay was so well written that it reached a large, spillover audience of moderates as well.

All readers perused an essay composed under trying conditions. By every account, King entered Birmingham jail with nothing to read and with no notes or examples of his own writing. However, he remembered earlier speeches and sermons and insinuated several familiar passages into his essay, including material he had originally obtained from sources. Because he relied on his memory—not directly on texts—the borrowed passages in “Letter” do not resemble his models as closely as usual. Still, several of his sources can be clearly identified.

For his arguments about nonconformity, he recalled his own sermon “Transformed Nonconformist,” including passages that came from Fosdick’s *Hope of the World* and from a sermon by H. H. Crane:

FOSDICK: We Christians were intended to be that [creative] minority. We were to be the salt of the earth, said Jesus. We were to be the light of the world. We were to be the leaven in the lump of the race. . . . That is joining the real church . . . *ecclesia* . . . a minority selected from the majority. . . . There was a time . . . when Christianity was very powerful. Little groups of men and women were scattered through the Roman Empire. . . . They were far less than two per cent and the heel of persecution was often on them, but they flamed with a conviction. . . .

Do you remember what Paul called them. . . . “We are a colony of heaven,” he said. . . . [Christianity] stopped ancient curses like infanticide. It put an end to the . . . gladiatorial shows.¹⁴

CRANE: Consider first the thermometer. Essentially, it . . . records or registers its environment. . . . Instead of being *conformed* to this world, [man] can *transform* it. . . . For when he is what his Maker obviously intended him to be, he is not a thermometer; he is a thermostat . . . there is a thermostatic type of religion . . . and its highest expression is called *vita* Christianity.¹⁵

KING: There was a time when the church was very powerful. . . . In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power . . . immediately sought to convict the Christians for being “disturbers of the peace.” . . . But the Christians pressed on in the conviction that they were a “colony of heaven.” . . . Small in number, they were big in commitment. . . . By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Perhaps I must turn . . . to the inner spiritual church as the true *ekklesia* and hope of the world. These [ministers who support civil rights] have been the leaven in the lump of the race. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the Gospel. . . .¹⁶

¹⁴Fosdick, *Hope* 5–6.

¹⁵Crane 30, 32, 38.

¹⁶King, Jr., “Letter,” *Why* 91, 92.

King here eschewed the King James version of the Bible, which he normally used, and followed Fosdick in quoting from the 1922 Moffatt translation of Philippians 3:20 ("We are a colony of heaven").¹⁷ Significantly, the King James translation of this verse—"For our conversation is in heaven"—fails to provide *any* Biblical support for nonconformity. Here King owes a debt not only to Fosdick's lines, but also to Fosdick's choice of a specific scripture *and* a specific translation of that scripture. This translation contrasts substantively not only with the King James edition, but with almost all other available English translations.

Turning to another familiar source, King marshalled his arguments for non-violence and civil disobedience by refashioning ideas and language from two of Wofford's speeches. He reworded a passage from Wofford that he had used earlier in *Stride*:

WOFFORD: [Civil disobedience] involves the highest possible respect for the law. If we secretly violated the law, or tried to evade it, or violently tried to overthrow it, that would be undermining the idea of law, Gandhi argued. But by openly and peacefully disobeying an unjust law and asking for the penalty, we are saying that we so respect the law that when we think it is so unjust that in conscience we cannot obey, then we belong in jail until that law is changed.¹⁸

KING: In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law. . . . 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 the law.¹⁹

King also paraphrased Wofford's citation of Socrates, Augustine, and Aquinas as proponents of civil disobedience and Wofford's call for nonviolent gadflies.²⁰

For part of his analysis of segregation, King turned to George Kelsey, his professor at Morehouse, whose remarks on segregation proved useful on several occasions. In *Stride*, "A Challenge to Churches and Synagogues," and "Letter," King sometimes reiterated and sometimes adapted passages from Kelsey:

KELSEY: segregation is itself utterly un-Christian. It is established on pride, fear, and falsehood. . . . It is unbrotherly, impersonal, a complete denial of the

¹⁷See Moffatt. Preceding Fosdick, who published *Hope* in 1933, Luccock quoted the "colony of heaven" translation in the late 1920s. See Chapter 4. Conceivably, Luccock, Fosdick, and King were drawing on some translation other than Moffatt's but that seems unlikely, inasmuch as Moffatt's translation appeared shortly before Luccock's book and inasmuch as the "colony of heaven" metaphor represents a decidedly unusual translation of the original passage. I thank Ernest Miller for the importance of the Luccock/Fosdick/King translation from Philippians.

¹⁸Wofford, "Non-violence and the Law" 65–66.

¹⁹King, Jr., "Letter," *Why* 83–84.

²⁰Compare Wofford, "The Law" 2 and King, Jr., "Letter," *Why* 84; Wofford's "Nonviolence and the Law" 65, 68 and King, Jr., "Letter," *Why* 79, 82.

"I-Thou" relationship, and a complete expression of the "I-Thou" relation. Two segregated souls never meet in God.²¹

Compare King's statement in "A Challenge to the Churches and Synagogues":

[S]egregation is morally wrong and sinful. It is established on pride, hatred, and falsehood. It is unbrotherly and impersonal. Two segregated souls never meet in God. . . . To use the words of Martin Buber, segregation substitutes an "I-it" relationship for the "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.²²

King distilled this analysis in "Letter":

Segregation, to use the terminology of . . . Martin Buber, substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.²³

For his affirmation of interdependence, King borrowed another passage from Fosdick. Fosdick's "We are intermeshed in an inescapable mutuality" became King's "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality."²⁴

The black church originally supplied King with ideas about nonconformity, nonviolence, segregation, interdependence, and other themes trumpeted in "Letter." Invoking sacred time, he compared himself to the prophets and Paul and talked about Jesus, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Lincoln, and Jefferson as though they shared his cell block in Birmingham. Wielding his customary argument from authority, he also cited Socrates, Augustine, Aquinas, Tillich, Niebuhr, T. S. Eliot, and three Old Testament heroes.²⁵ He skillfully wove each of these references into the fabric of an astute analysis of segregation and civil disobedience in Birmingham.

While King drew on familiar sources for the content of "Letter," the intricate structure of his argument reflects his exposure to famous Euro-American philosophers, whose works offer many precedents of fine-spun philosophical persuasion. *Christian Century* and black and white sermons provide far fewer examples of the carefully layered appeals that structure "Letter."

King's essay can be seen as an exemplary, modern version of an oration from ancient Greece or Rome.²⁶ Basically "Letter" follows the steps of a typical classical speech: introduction, proposition, division, confirmation, refutation, and peroration. His tendency to move his argument forward through skillful digressions is a standard classical strategy. Offering a modest variation of classical form,

²¹Kelsey, "Christian Way" 44.

²²King, Jr., "Challenge" 158–159.

²³King, Jr., "Letter," *Why* 82. For correspondences between Kelsey's text and King's *Stride* and "Challenge," compare Kelsey, "Christian Way" 29, 40, 44, 47–48; King, Jr., *Stride* 104, 205–206, 210; and King, Jr., "Challenge" 158–159, 168.

²⁴Compare Fosdick, *Riverside* 251–252 and King, Jr., "Letter," *Why* 77.

²⁵The heroes were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

²⁶Fulkerson makes this argument, which I summarize in this paragraph.

he packed the bulk of his argument into his refutation, effectively refuting both major and minor premises of the eight clergymen's implicit syllogisms.²⁷ He practiced "multipremise refutation" by expressing disappointment at being labelled an extremist, then folding that argument into a vigorous defense of certain forms of extremism.²⁸ His "tone of sadness and compulsion" and expert understatement (e.g., "I cannot join you in your praise of the Birmingham police department") also enjoy precedents in classical rhetoric.²⁹ By registering his humility, his understatements paradoxically buttress his claims instead of undermining them.

Layered philosophical argument is just as crucial to "Letter" as the black 25 conception of religious roles that made it possible in the first place. *Christian Century*, white sermons, and black folk religion also inform King's essay in powerful ways. "Letter" masterfully interlaces themes of Fosdick, Wofford, Crane, and Kelsey; invokes multiple authorities; reinvigorates the sacred time of the folk pulpit; and supplies rich Pauline allusions and other Biblical echoes. King carefully subsumed each of these appeals within a larger inductive argument consisting of box-within-a-box, multipremise refutation—an argument as lucid as it is intricate. His keen awareness of the readership of *Christian Century* enabled him to choose truisms from appropriate authorities (including Tillich, Niebuhr, and Martin Buber) that would fit suitably into his larger scheme.

King's study of philosophy and theology during his years at Crozer and Boston accounts for the classical argument that structures his essay. Classical rhetoric directly or indirectly influenced every masterpiece of Western philosophy and theology that King's professors assigned him to read. Though he often expressed the major themes of "Letter"—sometimes with remarkably similar wording—at no other time did he ever summon its rigorously ordered, predominantly inductive logic and controlled understatement.

The uniqueness of the essay results primarily from his decision to go to jail, which reflects Biblical and African-American precedents for combining the roles of preacher, theologian, and agitator. His isolation in Birmingham jail—an isolation he never again experienced—enabled him to translate into popular terms the kind of argument he learned in the academy.

■ ■ CHALLENGING THE COMMUNITY

Despite the personal risk involved in challenging a community to which you are a member, writers do this all the time. Some writers identify their role as being a "gadfly" or "muckraker," someone who is willing to say what no one else wants to say. They believe that trying to find common ground would compro-

²⁷See Fulkerson 129.

²⁸Fulkerson 129.

²⁹For "tone of sadness," see Fulkerson 126. For "I cannot . . .," see King, Jr., "Letter," *Why* 936.