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Exploring the Characteristics of King's Tone on Justice, Civil Disobedience and Religion in the Letter from Birmingham Jail

During the darkest moments of history, natural leaders have emerged, uniting people toward a common cause and propelling them forward. In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr was arrested and put in jail for civil disobedience resulting from his direct action against racist policies of businesses in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. Civil disobedience is the voluntary act of breaking laws that the lawbreaker considers unjust. They are broken to shed light on the injustices and promote change. He sat in jail and wrote a letter in response to a public statement issued by eight clergymen discouraging the civil disobedience demonstrations in Birmingham. Although the clergymen agreed that racism is wrong, they point out that the acts of civil disobedience are unwarranted in their town, and these matters are best left to the courts to resolve. It is a demand to discourage and disapprove of the act as it could lead to dangerous situations. Uncharacteristically, King chose to answer these men as they were allies but did not have the correct notions about civil disobedience. These men were leaders of their own accord, and educating them meant educating many. This paper suggests that King's rhetorical strategy to

use strength and caution in his tone provides us with a deeper understanding of the act of civil disobedience. His persona projects impatience that is tempered with dignified reverence.

Firstly, in King's letter, there are many allusions to strength. King's tone, elaborations, and examples demonstrate many different kinds of strength. A great deal of mental, physical, and even emotional strength is required to be a Black citizen of America. There is emotional strength in looking a little girl in the eye and telling her, "… Funtown is closed to coloured children" (King 103). It is not an easy thing to disappoint one's family, but one has no choice when dealing with social and political barriers. This deprivation goes beyond locations but also includes events, services, and opportunities. This is where the lines of self-preservation and self-expression are tested. The bonds of slavery and oppression were finally broken by choosing a marriage of both. Unwillingly having "… waited over 340 years for [their] constitutional and God-given rights" (King 103), King acknowledges that far too much time has already passed and explains to the clergymen that his actions are indeed justified. When King and his followers were instructed to wait some more, they showed courage by ignoring this request and choosing to break the unjust laws and face the consequences. "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed" (King 103). King uses this rhetorical device to identify a problem and present a solution. There is strength in the persona required to go against the social norms and expectations and fulfil the needs of one's independence. King compares himself to the apostle Paul. "Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid" (King 101). Paul went where he was needed regardless of persecution. Even while arrested by Roman authorities and waiting for trial, Paul preached his gospel (Clement 5:6; Floating 3863). Civil disobedience involves direct action which means holding to strict nonviolence when faced with violence. This requires incredible

mental and physical strength. King's tone convinces us that the act of civil disobedience asked a lot of its people, and they were capable of rising to the occasion through strength.

Secondly, there is an undeniable use of quiet caution in King's letter. He reminds his readers that he chooses nonviolence over the extremes of passive indifference and violent revolution. "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" (King 107). The clergymen seem to believe that the act of civil disobedience and its demonstrations in Birmingham have roots in violence and upheaval. "Nonviolent resistance and direct action refers to those methods of resistance and direct action without physical violence in which members of the nonviolent group commit either (1) acts of omission… or (2) acts of commission… or (3) both" (Sharpe 44). This is the misunderstanding that King is trying to resolve. He does not wish for the act of civil disobedience to be combined with the acts of others but compared to them as a more humanistic approach. He points out that his is the preferable alternative and warns that if they stop him and his, more violent actions will likely come. "If [nonviolence] had not emerged, by now many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood" (King 107). The inequality has made people angry, and King chose to use caution rather than malice in delivering his message to prevent reactance among his readers. It is evident that if King were not present, participating, Christian, and advocating nonviolence, the civil rights movement would have looked a lot different. "… there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle" (King 107). King's tone implies he is aware of the other methods of going about a revolutionary act. However, his defence of the demonstrations is that

they are not causing physical harm to others. The demonstrators may get hurt but accept this to prove that the laws are unjust.

Finally, throughout the letter, a tone of impatience can be heard. King mentions having received a letter from a Texan brother saying, “all Christians know that the coloured people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry.” (King 107). Impatience is not bad when facing discriminatory laws, and he does not use euphemisms. Although polite, he will not present unpleasant situations more pleasantly. It was with great planning, organizing and uplifting that King was finally able to make progress in the justice system. Although the clergymen believed waiting was the right thing to do, religiously; King reminds them of many leaders who used extremist methods to develop the nation in a big way. “Was not Jesus an extremist for love…. Was not Amos…. Was not Paul…. Was not Martin Luther…. And John Bunyan…. And Abraham Lincoln…. And Thomas Jefferson” (King 108). King’s reverent tone is full of analogies of actions that are an homage to Christian values of love and tolerance. His rhetorical strategies involve a reverent tone and persona to reinforce the idea that civil disobedience is nonviolent.

The great and urgent fight for international justice in the 20th Century proved that there were extremists that caused hatred, violence, and bloodshed. King’s methods of civil disobedience and his poignant public speaking delivered an education about the plight of the Black community, their impatience for freedom, and the courage it takes to build a nonviolent revolution. It was a calculated strategy by leaders like Gandhi and King to choose nonviolence as the nucleus of their revolutions. For this unconventional approach, they will be remembered more respectfully than leaders like Che Guevara and Malcolm X, who were associated with more violent movements. King’s tone and persona while talking about the acts of civil disobedience

taught us that the most powerful battles can be fought and won peacefully. It may be difficult, but it is not a losing strategy. One would expect King's spirit to have diminished slightly from prison, but his tone and persona are still sound and as forceful as ever. Observation of King's version of the Civil Rights movement reminds us that even if one is in jail or on what feels like the losing side, follow King's example and do not show fear, weakness, or surrender to one's opponents.

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