

“Thus Saith the Lord”:  
The Theological Rhetoric of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Speaking to a Secular Age: Contextualizing Martin Luther King’s Rhetoric .....	1
Affirming Human Dignity: King’s Foundational Appeal.....	23
Defining Sin as Separation: King’s Logical Appeal.....	38
Enacting Justice: King’s Appeal to Character .....	56
Claiming Hope: King’s Embodied Theology .....	72
Conclusion: Word Made Flesh .....	87
Works Cited .....	91

## Speaking to a Secular Age: Contextualizing Martin Luther King's Rhetoric

*To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: [...] a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. (Eccles. 3.1-8, New King James Version)*

### **Introduction**

The Civil Rights Movement is primarily known for its political successes in ending the Jim Crow laws in the American South and its efforts at creating greater societal equality between black and white Americans. Due to its successes, the movement might be characterized as wholly political, but its most prominent voice did not view it through that lens. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. saw the struggle for his people's rights as a predominantly spiritual one, and his public writings are infused with moral principles based on his Christian worldview. This makes him rather unique among twentieth-century American leaders like Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Ronald Reagan; activists like Eugene Debs and W. E. B. Du Bois; and government figures like Justice Earl Warren, whose works were less overtly religious. King is also unique among this group in that his birthday is a federal holiday. These two features—King's religious rhetoric and his national appreciation—are more connected than they might immediately appear.

Dr. King's recognition as a successful civil rights leader is intimately tied to his oratorical acumen; his March on Washington speech, "I Have a Dream," is one of the seminal texts of the era, and centers on the Christian conception of inherent human dignity. How is it that a young preacher from Atlanta rose to national prominence? The first reason, of course, is King's

rhetorical skill; his writings evidence mastery of the three traditional artistic proofs Aristotle identifies in *Rhetoric*. Beyond this, however, King offered Americans a vision of the world where Christian orthodoxy unites with orthopraxy, reinvigorating what Charles Taylor calls our modern “secular age” with moral values that transcend the worldly experience. This message was something the nation needed to hear, though it may have been merely an unconscious longing for something more substantive than either secular thinkers or other Evangelical Christians were espousing.

### **Historical Context**

In the mid-twentieth century, race relations in the American South were becoming increasingly fraught. The harmful Southern social system of course is rooted in the seventeenth-century introduction of the African slave trade, but after the Civil War, previous political and social norms were disrupted. Rectification of these grievous wrongs seemed imminent. However, since the end of Reconstruction in 1877, black Americans had suffered under segregation that separated their lives from those of white Americans. Segregation was part of the Southern tradition as white citizens held onto customs that kept black citizens separated, and “[b]etween 1890 and 1915, Southern states enacted an array of statutes that led to a more rigid and universal framework for the social separation of the races” (Ring). Jim Crow laws, as these statutes became known, “regulated social contact in such places as restaurants, hotels, movie theaters, parks, schools, libraries, hospitals, and waiting rooms” (Ring).

Even where laws did not exist, de facto segregation—the uncodified customs and traditions that governed relationships between the races—prevented African Americans from fully participating in American society. Black Americans lived separate lives, apart from white Americans, continually fearful that a wrongly interpreted glance would lead to their death or

some other devastation. To be sure, segregation existed in the North, but the level of violence that ensured racial separation and the degree to which it was institutionalized never reached those of the South. Lynchings and race riots kept black Americans in their assigned place at the bottom of the social ladder by convincing them that attempts to change the status quo, or even being perceived as disrespectful toward any white person, could mean a swift and violent end. Segregation in this virulent form was a unique characteristic of Southern society.

In many ways, the Second World War unsettled the assumptions underlying segregation. African American soldiers had fought for democracy on other continents, then returned home only to face another form of racial oppression. Jim Crow laws and state constitutions prevented them from casting a ballot or, in some cases, even registering to vote. In the South, they could not participate in the form of government they had just fought to defend. The hypocrisy sat poorly with those Americans who considered the issue, and this dissatisfaction led to the Harlem Bus Boycott in 1941, the desegregation of the military in 1948, and the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of 1954. This activism culminated in the Civil Rights Act signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964. This legislation effectively killed the Jim Crow laws of the South by “forb[idding] discrimination in public places; provid[ing] funding for assistance to further desegregate schools; creat[ing] the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; and g[iving] the attorney general more authority to prosecute civil rights violations involving voting, the use of public facilities, government, and education” (Ring). Though racial discrimination did not end with the passage of one piece of legislation, the Civil Rights Act along with the companion Voting Rights Act of 1965 finally dismantled the institutional oppression of the Jim Crow Laws, none of which could have occurred without public pressure on the Johnson administration.

This shift in social attitudes stemmed from a movement, and movements need leaders. During the Civil Rights movement, the most prominent leader by far was Martin Luther King, Jr. King began his career as the pastor of Dexter Avenue Memorial Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, before being thrust into a political career in December 1955. At that time he was chosen to head the Montgomery Improvement Association, formed in the wake of Rosa Parks' arrest to protest the racial inequities of the city's transportation system and boycott the buses to exert pressure for change. When Montgomery was forced by the Supreme Court to desegregate their bus system the following December, King became a nationally known figure. He used this prominence to establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957. The SCLC enjoyed two major victories in the struggle against segregation: Birmingham (1963), which aimed at ending racial segregation in public spaces, and Selma (1965), which garnered public support for African American voting rights. Under King's leadership, the SCLC achieved gains in the area of civil liberties in Alabama and the other Southern states and improved African-Americans' voting access.

### **King as an Orator**

King's prominence as a leader of the struggle for political rights is surprising given his contentious politics and the narrow-minded conceptions of race at the time. King was a Southern African-American evangelical Baptist preacher; he was an academic with a Ph.D. from Boston University, where he researched two contemporary liberal theologians' (Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman) understandings of God; he was an activist seeking racial reconciliation by asserting the parity of black and white lives in God's eyes. None of these details account for his popularity beyond the black church. Yet in the decades since his untimely death at the hands of James Earl Ray, King has been lionized for his activism. According to the most recent 2011

Gallup poll (2011), more than 90 percent of American adults had a favorable opinion of him. Of those, 69 percent held a highly favorable opinion. This view is a far cry from his thirty-three percent favorability in August 1966, the last time Gallup polled on King during his lifetime (Jones). It would seem that in the fifty years since his death King's ideas have become as entrenched as segregation once was, a phenomenon that warrants closer examination of the means of persuasion used by this civil rights legend.

The most effective means that King used to persuade his fellow citizens was naturally his mastery of language. King was after all a preacher's son and a preacher himself; his vocation depended on his ability to capture his audience's attention. He was a gifted orator, and much has been said about his ability to communicate complicated, nuanced points quickly to a large audience. His "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" speech, "I Have a Dream," has been rated by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Texas A & M University as the top speech of the twentieth century (Wolff). There is no doubt that King was a master orator, but his writings, too, are filled with similarly affecting arguments. Throughout his writings, King consistently returns to questions of public morality, arguing for legal and de facto recognition of human dignity by illustrating systemic inequality's effects on the individual person. King frequently describes the problems he saw facing this country, which were at heart spiritual problems, and communicates a vision of the future that compels his audiences to changed hearts, minds, and action. King communicates this theologically laden political vision through the art of rhetoric.

### **Rhetorical Theory**

Defining rhetoric is a contentious undertaking. Common use suggests rhetoric is a means of obfuscation, hiding the truth behind pretty words. This criticism originates in Plato's *Gorgias*,

in which he suggests that rhetoric deceives people into doing foul things (Herrick 1). However, King's advocacy against evils like racism suggests that rhetoric is not inherently what Plato defines it as. Aristotle develops a more expansive and appropriate definition in his classic *Rhetoric*. He defines it in terms of persuading an audience to action, particularly, "the capacity to consider in each case the possible means of persuasion" (Fortenbaugh). This means that rhetoric is the consideration of the avenues that would communicate a truth meaningfully and persuasively. True, these avenues can be used for foul purposes, but they can also be used for good ones, a fact which Aristotle suggests, stating "Rhetoric is the counterpart of Dialectic" (xx). The dialectic was Plato's preferred means of finding the truth of a matter; Aristotle is merely showing how rhetoric is a complement to the dialectic—communicating that truth to others.

Aristotle does not require that speakers successfully convince their audience of a fact; rather, speakers must simply understand the situation and try to be as persuasive as possible in an effort to effect some kind of action. King was a master rhetorician, and while he certainly experienced failures in his pursuit of justice, his public writings were consistently focused on creating a better world. To this end, whether consciously or subconsciously, King employed Aristotle's proposed methodology of persuasion, undergirded by his own theological convictions. Examination of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" along these lines shows how masterfully King blended theological convictions with his rhetorical appeals. Though he may not have successfully persuaded his intended audience to join the civil rights cause, he used his understanding of the era to appeal to the public's sense of injustice, eventually changing public opinion and achieving the end of de jure segregation through his rhetoric and activism.

*Rhetorical Appeals: Ethos*

In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, he explicitly identifies three modes of persuasion: *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. *Ethos* concerns the character of the speaker as reflected in the text. According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, "although [Aristotle] comes close to affirming *ethos* as the most potent means of persuasion, he gives it the least theoretical development" (Sloane, "Ethos"). Because of this deficit, researchers have developed a working theory of *ethos*: "In its simplest form, *ethos* is what we might call the argument from authority" (Halloran 60). This authority is twofold: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic *ethos* is the vision of the speaker as he or she has presented him or herself to the public previously; audiences naturally import their prior knowledge of a speaker's character as it relates to the argument being presented. The latter, intrinsic *ethos*, relates to the image the audience receives through the elements of a text. As a speaker presents an argument, the choices communicate important details about the speaker's character. The *ethos*, therefore, as a means of persuasion "is a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic factors" (*Dictionary of Media and Communication Studies*). For King, this combination was built upon his ministerial profession and the faith he presented throughout his writings.

As an element of persuasion, then, *ethos* is ineliminable. Audiences must believe that the person speaking is virtuous, motivated by the right intention; doubt about those intentions creates doubts about the speaker's dependability. The most direct way one communicates this moral authority is through the intentional and unintended choices one makes in an argument to highlight certain virtues. In the first book of *Rhetoric* Aristotle enumerates these possibilities as justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence, and wisdom (173). Of course, different cultures weigh these virtues differently. American culture, for example, highly prizes independence, privacy, equality, achievement, and efficiency, among others (University of Missouri-St. Louis). These determine how speakers will approach their

subject. As King wrote, he had to consider how his vision comported with those cultural values and correct understandings that he saw as wrong or incomplete.

### *Logos*

King certainly employed *ethos* well in his arguments, but to be considered a master of rhetoric, he also needed to have control over *logos*. *Logos* generally means “word” or “speech,” but within the context of an argument, it refers to the underlying logic of the whole case. Plato, Aristotle’s teacher, thought of truth as objective rather than subjective, and the method that he used to seek truth was the dialectic, a conversation about a topic in order to discover the underlying truth. For this reason, Plato hated the sophists who roamed around Greece in his day, teaching rhetoric as a way of winning arguments without caring whether truth was on their side (Trebing). Aristotle, in *Rhetoric*, sought to overcome the division Plato saw between the fact of truth and rhetoric’s tendency to obfuscate it. From the outset, Aristotle claims, “Rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic” (95). For Aristotle, once truth has been determined through dialogue, rhetoric can be used to persuade people of that truth.

A sound argument is necessary for persuading an audience because claims require support in order to be persuasive, and *logos* as a mode of persuasion concerns itself with the proofs that develop an argument. King’s writings draw from the Christian logic, developing what he saw as an American Christianity, one that held to essential doctrine yet spoke to his own time. Aristotle identifies two central kinds of reasoning that he considers to be persuasive: example and enthymeme. Within the former, he further identifies two kinds of example: “one consisting in the mention of actual past facts, the other in the invention of facts by the speaker” (*Rhetoric* 335). The latter gets far more treatment throughout *Rhetoric*, yet King emphasizes the former to concretize the racial struggle. The enthymeme is essentially a rhetorical syllogism, a series of

statements that make a claim based on premises; however, the difference between a syllogism and an enthymeme is that an enthymeme often is missing the major premise—that is, it does not include the fact that everyone should know. “Enthymemes are based upon one or other of four kinds of alleged fact: (1) Probabilities, (2) Examples, (3) Infallible Signs, (4) Ordinary Signs” (*Rhetoric* 391), and these facts should be used to create a cogent, logical argument. If an argument does not follow, the arbiters, legislators, or public the speaker is attempting to persuade will not be moved to any action, regardless of the action’s rightness.

### *Pathos*

The third of the artistic proofs Aristotle identifies in *Rhetoric* is *pathos*. *Pathos* concerns the emotional appeals a speaker makes in his argument; it is also commonly referred to as the audience appeal (Sloane, “Pathos”). This requires “putting the audience in the right frame of mind.” To do so, a speaker must understand emotions, particularly, according to Aristotle, “(1) the mental state of the person who is experiencing the particular emotion, (2) with whom they experience that emotion, and (3) the actions that create that emotion” (Tollefson). By understanding these things, a speaker can more effectively create these same feelings within his audience.

However, in order to elicit a particular emotion in the audience, one must also understand one’s audience, starting with their stage of life. Though Aristotle suggests that *logos* ought to be the most persuasive element of an argument, he recognizes that one’s emotions are often more compelling than one’s reason. For example, he recognizes that those whose delivery is superior often win oratory contests, which suggests that delivery is of primary importance in the minds of some audience members. King’s appeals to *pathos* are often couched in the injustice his people

experience and how that painfully affects them. The most famous passage from “The Letter from Birmingham Jail” masterfully demonstrates King’s control of this proof:

[...] when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; [...] 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 are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. (Washington 292-293)

This sentence, building to a climax that rejects an inappropriate request for patience, uses the experiences King and his fellow African Americans face daily in America as an emotional trigger to encourage empathy in his readers.

### *Rhetorical Purpose*

These three modes—*ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*—are naturally linked together by the speaker’s intended purpose, or the goal of the speaker’s attempted persuasion. Aristotle identifies three primary kinds of oratory: the political, the judicial, and the ceremonial. Each requires different considerations, including careful, nuanced understandings of one’s goal and how *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* contribute to that goal’s achievement. *Ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* help to put the

“audience in the right frame of mind” (Hesk 151), and in considering how to achieve one’s end in a given situation, one invariably considers what balance to strike. Each proof naturally lends itself to a kind of oratory, but the appropriate balance of the proofs depends more on the particular situation than the genre one is working in.

For this reason, considering King’s specific situation highlights his oratorical effectiveness. King was an Atlanta-based Baptist preacher thrust onto the national stage as a representative in the fight against segregation. He was of course making a political argument, but he was simultaneously making a judicial argument. He was questioning the justness of the laws in order to push for changing them, and this required a particularly careful balance of proofs. He knew the importance of striking the right balance in order to make actual progress on such a sensitive issue; he was sensitive to the power white leaders held and the need to persuade them in order to make real political change. Some of his contemporaries, such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, undervalued these considerations. King, however, spoke of the need for reflection and self-purification as crucial to nonviolent activism, suggesting that he was intentional about the moves he made politically. He demonstrated the same intentionality in his rhetoric as well. Because King was more intentional about his rhetoric, he unified his message with his methods, but this alone doesn’t seem to completely account for his success as a leader.

### **Appealing to *Kairos***

There is one additional mode of persuasion inherent in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* that helps explain King’s effectiveness: *kairos*. *Kairos* is one of two Greek words for “time” available to Aristotle, the other being *chronos*. J. E. Smith claims the difference between *chronos* and *kairos* is understood best as the difference between quantitative and qualitative time—that is, the former is merely the sequential passage of events and the latter is the appropriate moment for a thing to

happen (Kinneavy and Eskin 433). King's career is deeply rooted in his time period, resisting the specific injustices of segregation, poverty, and militarism. His activism against these three injustices from a theological standpoint allows him to speak to the significant needs of that period. By understanding the period's needs and speaking to them meaningfully, King appeals to *kairos* and begins to refashion time for justice.

This conception of *kairos* as the opportune moment pervades *Rhetoric*, yet it is one of the least emphasized modes in Aristotle's text itself and in rhetorical analyses more generally. Throughout the text, the specific word occurs only three times, and two of those times merely indicate that discussion of a point will occur later or that enough discussion of a point has occurred (Kinneavy and Eskin 435-36). Because of this specific omission, the word is often left out of discussions of rhetorical modes. In three popular handbooks to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, for example, *kairos* is completely absent (Kinneavy and Eskin 432). Even expanding the search to both the specific word and its roots, the concept of *kairos* occurs only sixteen times in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. These uses expand the discussion of *kairos* from a simple acknowledgement that additional discussion of a concept will happen later in the text to a discussion of fittingness generally.

However, while the word *kairos* may be explicitly mentioned infrequently, the concept is present throughout *Rhetoric*. Though the word occurs in its basic form just at most sixteen times, this small number of uses does not account for the importance of the concept to Aristotle's framework. With the expanded understanding of *kairos* as befitting a moment, a fuller picture of what *kairos* specifically refers to, namely the appropriate time for a text or appeal, begins to take shape. When discussing what occasions bring people to love another, Aristotle claims things done "cordially rendered, or under certain circumstances [*kairois*]" will make one appear more

worthy of love (Kinneavy and Eskin 438). According to Kinneavy and Eskin, this formula is repeated fifteen more times in that particular work of Aristotle's, but with reason replacing circumstance. As reason and circumstance are interrelated, it appears that Aristotle is concerned with the situation as a mitigating factor in the framing of an argument. This is what *kairos* properly understood is, a concern for saying the right thing and making the right appeal in the appropriate circumstance. King's lifetime came at a turning point in American politics, and his appreciation for people's felt needs helped him as he considered the tactics he would use to persuade the people.

### **The Needs of a Secular Age**

King's mastery of rhetoric meant that he spoke the right words at the right time, but why would a seemingly Christian nation need someone to speak about politics in an explicitly religious way? Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* provides an insightful response to this question as he explains how this modern era came to feel a need for a fuller Christian faith, a need which King's rhetorical theology speaks to. According to James K. A. Smith's *How (Not) to Be Secular*, Taylor provides a road map of culture through history to the present, tracing the shifts in culture from the Middle Ages to today. This understanding of the history Taylor describes helps clarify King's instinct for *kairos*. In this text, Taylor identifies three different kinds of secularity, which Smith categorizes as Secular<sub>1</sub>, Secular<sub>2</sub>, and Secular<sub>3</sub>. Secular<sub>1</sub> is by far the simplest conception; it refers to the common division of the things of life from the things of God. This definition was, according to Taylor, the original and therefore the predominant one understood by people throughout history. In essence, Secular<sub>1</sub> describes the difference between what a butcher does and what a priest does (Smith 20-21). Both vocations were necessary to life in the pre-Enlightenment era, and both exist within the same general space.

Secular<sub>1</sub> became Secular<sub>2</sub> during the Enlightenment beginning in the seventeenth century, as Christianity began to lose some of the cultural cachet it had long held in the West. Simply put, Secular<sub>2</sub> seeks to create an a-religious public space (Smith 21). The ecumenical definition of religious freedom in the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence is a prime example of this form of secularity (Smith 21). Prior to the Enlightenment, across Europe there were strong ties between religious institutions and state governments. Those ties provided significant legitimacy to those governments, giving the heads of state the divine right to lead their countries. In America, the founders challenged this notion as various Christian sects conglomerated within one nation (Smith 87). On Jefferson's terms from the Declaration of Independence, a non-sectarian "creator" provided inherent rights to people, but the government came about because of the people's will. Part of this legitimacy was contingent on the condition that the government would not support any particular religion.

One feature of this form of secularity has meant that any public space, such as schools and government buildings, cannot explicitly or implicitly endorse any religious practices. For example, the Scopes Trial of 1925 challenged the requirement of educators to teach creation as part of their curriculum. Later, the Supreme Court decisions in *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp* (1963) both limited required school prayer. These three events began the trend that generally excluded religious practices in public schools. In an age of increasingly diverse communities, a Secular<sub>2</sub> world creates a space for greater participation in public life, which seems valuable, especially in a democracy.

The third kind of secularity Taylor identifies, and the one most significant to an understanding of how and why King's message spoke so powerfully to his cultural moment, is Secular<sub>3</sub>, in which understanding the world without a god becomes conceivable (Smith 21-22).

This seems a natural enough extension of Secular<sub>2</sub>. If public spaces can exist without God, the thinking seems to go, so too can private ones. This reduces religion to one among many possible choices to explain the world, which in turn reduces the need for religion in general. Taylor suggests that this leads to a flattening of the world. Life becomes about the immanent, the material, and the easily observed (Smith 92-93). Transcendent goods, according to Taylor, lose their value, and in Secular<sub>3</sub>'s view objects that point to a supernatural world are stripped of their transcendence and become wholly restricted to this world. Smith refers to these stripped things as "thin" with value rather than being "thick" with meaning like they once had been.

As Secular<sub>2</sub> slipped into Secular<sub>3</sub>, thinkers began to offer a worldview without a need for God. The Cult of Reason was France's first state-sponsored religion in the post-Revolution era, and it was anthropocentric, an explicit response to Robespierre's Cult of the Supreme Being. In Königsberg, Immanuel Kant attempted to systematize reality based exclusively in the observable, and while he may not have intended to deny God's necessity in the world, his works certainly have been interpreted that way in some circles. Karl Marx's theory of life as determined by the economic certainly exhibits elements of Secular<sub>3</sub> thinking, as does Charles Darwin's materialistic evolutionary model of life's origins. Even in pedagogical discussions, elements of Secular<sub>3</sub> thinking pervaded reform movements. Beyond the court cases which restricted the role of religion in the classroom, Matthew Arnold's attempt to replace the Bible with the literary canon as the foundation for cultural edification and improvement is perhaps the most explicit of the changes he effected. As public spaces became areligious, other explanations of value were necessary to fill the void left in the absence.

## **Immanent Civil Rights**

In the Civil Rights movement, this kind of areligious, Secular<sub>3</sub> view was represented by Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X. Carmichael was for a time the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Prime Minister of the Black Panther Party. Malcolm X was an outspoken leader of the Nation of Islam, which combined Islamic beliefs with Black Nationalism. Both Carmichael and Malcolm X were separatists and vehement critics of white Americans. Both believed in violence as necessary for effecting justice, though Carmichael in particular seemed to view it as a tool for creating change, and both criticized King and his followers for their peaceful reactions to attacks by white people.

Despite their best efforts, neither Malcolm X nor Stokely Carmichael made much significant impact in effecting long lasting political change, and it seems that their lack of consideration for the times was the main cause of their struggles. King, on the other hand, significantly tied his political arguments to his faith, marrying Christian doctrine with Christian practice. He recognized that the secularity of the age was precisely the root of the injustice he saw and what needed combatting. People needed to revitalize the political realm with the transcendence offered by religion. Carmichael's views, on the other hand, were completely divorced from the external value structures that religion offered. He seemed invested in gaining political power purely for its own sake. Malcolm X in his early years of activism similarly valued Islam only as it related to Black Nationalism, although he would later convert to Sunni Islam precisely because the Nation of Islam overemphasized separation rather than union. Malcolm X actually would go on to support causes focused on the suffering of the poor in the international community rather than just speaking on race in America. This renewed interest in unity came from the values his newly embraced religion offered. In this way, Malcolm X came

to see the transcendent values of religion as ends unto themselves, and that reshaped his politics to resemble King's more.

Malcolm X, before his conversion, and Stokely Carmichael rightly recognized the problems of segregation, and their anger feels somewhat righteous, but that righteousness lacks roots and is therefore transitory in a Secular<sub>3</sub> world. This branch of secularism is concerned only with the material world, and as such its adherents' values are contingent only upon the people's ability to continue holding them. This transience naturally feels unsatisfactory. The transitory nature of that righteousness and its unsatisfactory conclusions are the void that King's transcendent rhetoric fills. Values must transcend the finite to be of any permanent worth; otherwise, they are subjective and at the mercy of the whims of the transitory. This may seem nihilistic, but Secular<sub>3</sub>'s inherent relativism suggests that things have no meaning beyond this life, and that is in its own way nihilistic. Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael rightly saw the value inherent in human beings and the evil of segregation, and those who agreed with them accurately valued justice, but within a Secular<sub>3</sub> framework, this value has no external origin, no ground on which to stand, and is therefore fleeting.

### **Religious Secularity**

King, on the other hand, saw that theistic worldviews rooted in a pre-Secular<sub>3</sub> world, particularly the Judeo-Christian one, provided a better answer to the notion of value the civil rights movement prized. The Judeo-Christian mindset that King was raised and educated in affirmed that God created each person, imbued them with the *imago dei*, the image of God (Gen. 1:27), and He loves each person, signified by His sending His son to redeem the world through his crucifixion (Rom. 5:8). As creator of the universe whose goodness is inextricable from his character, God's judgment is both objective and deeply personal. This objectivity is the key

element that is absent in a Secular<sub>3</sub> world. The personhood of God gives each person's life inherent meaning because if an objective standard of goodness finds someone to be worthy of love, then that person's life has meaning, and if every person's life has meaning, then the relationships that encircle that person share in that value. Each person is loved by God, and therefore is worthy of love, regardless of the transitory judgments of people, culture, or institutions that will pass away. This permanence and objectivity help provide the value people seek in life but cannot find in a materialist worldview. But, importantly, King's theistic foundations were in no way at odds with concern for the material world; in fact, they made all the more pressing the need to rectify social injustice. This marriage of Christian theology and political activism further amplified King's voice at that crucial moment.

In 1950, 55% of all Americans were affiliated with a church (Ahlstrom 952), and so had found the supernatural reservoir of value they needed. They knew about sin and justice because they would have heard about each in their church services. They should have felt the need to correct instances of injustice and evil in the political sphere. Yet, if the answer to the sin of segregation was simply a Christian speaking out against it, the obvious question is why did it take a 27-year-old Martin Luther King to actually begin to talk about it and make change? The answer is, of course, that as public spaces and politics stopped being Christian, evidenced by increased court challenges to religious practice in schools and other government institutions, many Christians avoid contentious social issues in their sermons. Some, like W. A. Gamble of Hollandale, Mississippi, avoided challenging the status quo by railing against communism and supporting free enterprise (Chappell 124), but others, such as the Fundamentalists, became concerned with the afterlife at the expense of challenging societal issues. In 1947, when King was 16, Carl F. H. Henry put the problem this way:

Today, Protestant Fundamentalism although heir-apparent to the supernaturalist gospel of the Biblical and Reformation minds, is a stranger, in its predominant spirit, to the vigorous social interest of its ideological forebears. Modern fundamentalism does not explicitly sketch the social implications of its message for the non-Christian world; it does not challenge the injustices of the totalitarianisms, the secularisms of modern education, the evils of racial hatred, the wrongs of current labor-management relations, the inadequate bases of international dealings. (39)

Henry paints a stark picture of his era, and it probably reflected the objective reality of his personal experience with fundamentalism. However, the reality of the religious trends of the era seems more complicated.

The problems Henry saw in fundamentalism do not seem unique to his own interpretation of the era's religious issues. His relative liberalism likely shaped much of his analysis of the fundamentalist faith, an understandable evaluation because he was a moderate evangelical, educated in northern seminaries and schools like Wheaton College and Boston University (Mullins). Though Henry's criticism of fundamentalism may seem overly harsh, he was not alone in condemning the clergy for not speaking against social evils. Segregation was a particularly contentious and meaningful topic. Civil rights advocates like King and James Lawson certainly held that more should be done by churches to effect change (Chappell 108). Other less well-known preachers like Dale Cowling and Clyde Gordon opposed clerical arguments supporting segregation, implicating their fellow pastors whose sermons argued for such evils (Chappell 116). This perceived inability to challenge what today is a clear social evil by any meaningful portion of the dominant religious communities suggests that Henry's analysis of fundamentalism's flaws extends beyond that faith.

The racism that underlies arguments for segregation may well have been the dominant belief in white, southern churches, especially given the general racial attitudes of the time, but both the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the southern branch of the denomination, and the Southern Baptist Convention “overwhelmingly passed resolutions supporting desegregation” (Chappell 107-08). This appears to complicate the narrative of the southern church being a haven for social injustices like segregation. Rabid segregationists actually condemned the church for being too liberal on race. T. R. Miller, a friend of *Southern Presbyterian Journal* editor L. Nelson Bell, quit the church, writing, “I have lost practically all the respect I ever had (and it was great at one time) for the clergy of all churches, and for the churches themselves” (qtd. in Chappell 128). And Miller was not alone. The Association of Citizens’ councils of Louisiana suspected communists had invaded the SBC for its support of integration. Likewise, William D. Workman and Roy Harris, a South Carolina and Georgia powerbroker respectively, both felt their religious commitments strain for the same reasons (Chappell 128-29).

The church’s ability to be perceived as both for and against integration speaks to its most major issue—moderation. “The historically significant thing about the white religion in the 1950s-60s is not its failure to join the civil rights movement. The significant thing, given that the church was probably as racist as the rest of the white South, is that it failed in any meaningful way to join the anti-civil rights movement” (Chappell 107). Given the nearly 90% share of the population white people had during this era (United States Census Bureau) and the 75% opposition to integration the white population expressed (Schuman et al. 74-75), Chappell’s assertion does seem significant. The church’s support for integration was tepid at best and at worst merely a “cautious respect for the duly constituted authority of the Supreme Court” (108), neither of which speaks to strong convictions. King and the other civil rights leaders may have

gotten rhetorical value out from the church's rare support for their demonstrations, but they were likely unsurprised.

What is surprising in this context, though, is the failure of the church to move in the other direction and strongly favor segregation. Parishioners likely held strong anti-integration beliefs, but “[i]t is surprising how little southern white clergymen contributed to the record of the segregationist cause” (Chappell 112). This may have been to avoid politics in the pulpit, as some historians have argued (Chappell 123), but it also divided the clergy from their followers, which encouraged silence and detachment from pastors on important issues of the day. The embrace of neither suggests a church fully committed to an ideology of passivity. It instead suggests a church that “loved other things—peace, social order—more” (Chappell 107). For the felt need of a church that spoke meaningfully to social issues like racial injustice as well as his theological clarity, Martin Luther King, Jr. garnered some support for the civil rights movement and began to make changes for justice.

## **Conclusion**

King embodied his theology in his activism and his rhetoric, a sharp distinction between himself and his contemporaries. In contrast to both these Christian leaders who were uncommitted to an ideology on a contentious issue like segregation and Carmichael and Malcolm X, whose worldviews were inherently thin because of their exclusively materialist conclusion, King's rhetoric and activism showed a commitment to a material world thick with transcendent value. This separated King from his contemporaries, allowing him to use *kairos* to his advantage. He tapped into a felt need by combining immanent concerns with transcendent values. These values are expressed throughout his writings, most especially in “An Experiment in Love,” “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” and “I See the Promised Land.” Through his

masterful rhetorical appeals in these three works, King establishes his theological convictions about human dignity, sin, justice, and hope.

King's writings themselves inherently responded to Malcolm X and Carmichael's materialist conclusions, but "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" nicely illustrates King's response to his fellow Christians. In this text, King wrote to eight Birmingham clergymen who were encouraging local African Americans to end their participation in the demonstrations King was leading. These clergymen came from different faiths and denominations, with at least one rabbi and one Catholic priest joining the predominantly protestant clergy. These men were typical, or even liberal, for the religious trends of the era; they were moderates accepting integration, but they wanted more gradual integration. King's response to them is intended to change these men's understanding of his purposes, trying to convince them of his just cause. To do this, King brings to bear all the rhetorical appeals to articulate the theological underpinnings of his activism and to persuade the audience of the urgency of his cause. Through this act, King re-imbues the public discussion of civil rights with moral language, resacralizing it, and embodying the transcendent values he holds. In both "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" and his general works, King offered God, fully and completely, to a nation that he saw as in need.

## Affirming Human Dignity: King's Foundational Appeal

*So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female  
He created them. (Gen. 1.27, NKJV)*

### **Introduction**

Dr. King's most prominent concern, the one for which he is best known, is political equality for white and black Americans. This struggle was recently dramatized in the 2014 film *Selma* and memorialized the following year by President Barack Obama in a speech remembering "Bloody Sunday." These two works focus on the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, as a microcosm of King's larger efforts for recognition of his fellow citizens' right to vote. Due in large part to that march, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 became a major piece of the Johnson administration's policy achievements.

King was not, of course, concerned only with the right to vote; he wanted the end of the Jim Crow laws and worked to fight racism as much as possible. The great evil of segregation, both de jure and de facto, led him into the public arena, and motivated him to do significant work to raise the status of African-Americans and help them be respected. This fundamental goal shaped his career throughout his life, but he also shifted his focus, looking beyond the status of African Americans to evils throughout the world as his historical circumstances changed. As his focus shifted, he took on more complex issues like economic inequality and war, injustices deeply embedded in the American and human experiences. In these areas, he made less progress than in his earlier acts. King's interests were broad, but they were not always popular; however, he continued to work at ending the evils he saw in the world until his death.

### ***Imago Dei as the Foundation of King's Activism***

King is rightly recognized as a strong political organizer of African Americans, given the success he had at that. He and the SCLC began to reshape the American South, but limiting his work to merely the political does a disservice to his overall motivations. Later in his life, King became an advocate for military peace as well as a radical activist for economic harmony. Despite claims by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the contrary, it would be unfair to say that King was a socialist or a communist, but his Poor People's Campaign sought to target<sup>1</sup> the injustices he saw in abusive forms of capitalism (Dorrien 461). His fame as an organizer may originate with his civil rights advocacy, but King's vision of the future was rooted in the three sins of segregation, poverty, and militarism, all of which stemmed from their affront to human dignity. King's aims were political only as a means to a broader end; his ultimate goal was community and the harmonious relationship between people that a healthy, flourishing community fosters. In this way, King's rhetoric speaks to much more fundamental truths whose applicability extended far beyond his signature concern with racial equality. The foundation of King's theological groundwork, what gives rise to all other features of his worldview, is his commitment to human dignity.

This is the key theme that emerges early on in King's work, namely the value he places on the inherent dignity of persons, as beings created by God and in his image. This conviction derives from King's personalist philosophy, a belief system that sees personality and personhood as the ultimate reality; for Christian personalists like King, God is the person at the foundation of

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<sup>1</sup> Announced in the December just before his assassination, the Poor People's Campaign was meant to be another march on Washington D.C. for better jobs, homes, and education. King never saw this march or the construction of Resurrection City because they began on April 29, 1968, and May 14th respectively. The campaign ended in June of the same year, ultimately making little impact on the public policies of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty ("Dr. King's Vision").

all that exists.<sup>2</sup> For King, then, people, regardless of skin color, deserve respect and decency because they are loved by God, their creator. Without the dignity people inherently possess, King's entire worldview collapses because a relationship with God would not truly exist, but King did not develop this worldview in a vacuum. It is unlikely to collapse because it is built upon the Christian conception of the *imago dei*, the doctrine that all people are created in the image of God. King learned this doctrine in church as a child, refined his understanding in graduate school, and taught it from the pulpit and the political stage. In his public writing, especially "An Experiment in Love," King more fully developed his convictions about the value of persons, intertwining a vision of the *imago dei* with a proclamation of *agapé* love to establish a strong rhetorical appeal to *pathos*. This pathetic appeal, whereby King demonstrates his commitment to human dignity by insisting on it even for those who opposed him, is first developed in "An Experiment in Love." Eventually this appeal to *pathos* finds its fullest expression in King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," which underscores the rhetorical power and theological heft of his vision of justice.

An early articulation of King's personalist philosophy comes in "An Experiment in Love," an excerpt from his first book, *Stride toward Freedom*. In these pages, King defines *agapé* as the foundation upon which all healthy human interaction is ideally built. Originally published in *Jubilee: A Magazine of the Church and Her People*, "An Experiment in Love" begins by reframing the nonviolent movement's founding as a deeply Christian movement. According to King, the nomenclature of "nonviolent resistance," "noncooperation," and "passive resistance" came later, after the influence of Gandhi became apparent to those outside the movement. What King identifies as the most common phrase during the initial phase of the

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas O Buford, "Personalism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/personal/>, 4 May 2019.

movement was “Christian Love,” particularly as inspired by the Sermon on the Mount. For King, “An Experiment in Love” is one of his most public reaffirmations of Jesus’s centrality to the movement; it seems to be, in a way, a response to a perceived erasure of the Christian foundation of the movement. Gandhi’s methods may have informed King and the Montgomery Improvement Association’s, but their choice to use those methods was built upon a foundation of love that King develops in this text.

The love King sees as foundational to the movement is of divine origin. It is not, according to him, “some sentimental or affectionate emotion” because “[i]t would be nonsense to urge men to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense” (19). He dismisses *phileo* and *eros*, love of brother and romantic love respectively, as outside his intended purposes. These may be the end at which the movement aims, but *phileo* and *eros* require either mutuality or attraction, impossible feelings when one side hates the other. Instead, the nonviolent resistance philosophy is built on *agapé* love. He says that *agapé* “means understanding, redeeming good will for all men. It is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object. It is the love of God operating in the human heart” (19).

### *Agapé*

The first label King uses to describe *agapé* love in “An Experiment in Love” is “understanding, redemptive good will” (19). The primary definition of “understanding” is “to comprehend, to apprehend the meaning or import of” (“Understand”), and comprehension requires direct knowledge. One must stand before someone in order to know that person. It requires careful examination, the kind that might be uncomfortable both to the viewer and the viewed. Understanding by the viewer does not try to alter the viewed, but rather seeks to

recognize and appreciate his uniqueness. This is the essence of King's use of "understanding." People are flawed and in need of redemption. Redemption requires understanding. *Agapé* love can create that understanding. For this reason, the proper response is to love people with *agapé* despite their sins but not to ignore those issues. In order to redeem them God's *agapé* is available "for all men" (19); therefore, all people must be loved.

The second attribute that King ascribes to *agapé* is "overflowing," which he modifies through use of the word "spontaneous" (19). For King, *agapé* cannot be contained within one's self; it must be given away to others. It overwhelms one's internal boundaries because one is already full of the love. By spontaneous, King suggests that *agapé* is entirely unselfish; it's given to anyone in front of one's self, regardless of his or her deserving. In fact, King dismisses questions of worth in the next set of descriptors—"unmotivated, groundless" (19). For King, *agapé* "does not discriminat[e] between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people possess" (19). Because it is freely given regardless of merit, *agapé* is distinctly divine. *Eros* and *phileo* point to the interrelationships of people, one to another. Those relationships must be affectionate; otherwise, there is no love. *Agapé*, on the other hand, does not depend on the relationship one has because it is inherently spontaneous, which implies no necessary prior relationship between giver and receiver.

All of these characteristics—understanding, spontaneous, unmotivated—are tied together in King's final introductory statement: "It [*agapé*] is the love of God operating in the human heart" (19). This is the crux of King's definition. Because God is wholly self-sufficient, wholly good and worthy, and omniscient according to Christian doctrine, He exhibits *agapé*. He does not need other beings beyond Himself to relate to. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three beings in one and do not require others, yet God created everything, including people, out of his

self-giving *agapé* love. Out of His abundant grace, God can and does have *agapé* for people; this is almost incomprehensible, yet He does. King, cognizant of that tension, asks his followers to have that same love for their enemies, acknowledging the difficulty by suggesting that only through God's operating in the heart can this be achieved.

### **Personalism: King's Philosophical Frame**

This is the heart of King's personalism, an applied ethical framework stemming from the notion that God's personhood is ultimate reality and that human persons flourish insofar as they are rightly related to Him and to each other. Essentially, a person is a conscious agent in the world, one who has the self-awareness to experience existence in meaningful ways. This consciousness allows him or her to make judgments about his or her state of existence. These judgments allow the person to project into the future and envision what life should be, recognizing the *telos*, or ultimate purpose, for which he or she exists and therefore finding value in who he or she should be. Personalism, then, is an inherently relational philosophy in which all people "are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And what affects one directly affects all indirectly" (Carter 221). One cannot be what one is truly meant to be until others are who they are meant to be (Carter 221). Human beings are unique in the Christian faith. Because God created Man in His likeness (Genesis 1:27), every person bears the *imago dei*, and this gift is only applied to people, making people unique among creation. According to Carl Henry, "that humanity by creation uniquely bears the image of God is a fundamental biblical doctrine" ("Image of God"). Biblically, image (*tselem* and *eikon* in the Old and New Testaments respectively) denoted an "exact resemblance" (Henry "Image"). Determining what specifically bears that exact resemblance is complicated by sin, but in the purest form, humans bear the rational, moral, and spiritual image of God.

In the personalist framework, because God is a personal being, He senses, desires, oughts, remembers, imagines, and possesses all those other powers Bertocci argues persons have. Likewise, people have the same capacities, though in reduced forms. The personalist argues that people can develop values, but a person is not the arbiter of what is good. Only God is that standard. God created our world out of His capacity for love, and while we can imagine and love what we create, it remains fictional despite our best efforts. We have similar capacities, but at a much smaller scale, and this makes us unique among God's creations. While other creatures may have memories or be able to self-identify, we are the only ones God imbued with all those traits, and He declared our creation good. God is eminently loving, and by declaring humanity good, he stamped his approval on the creation as something He loves. His approval imparts a compelling, undeniable dignity to every person, and by being the judge of all things and loving humans, He declares people inherently worthy of love from others.

### **Unselfish Love**

Another essential feature of *agapé* that King describes in "An Experiment in Love" is disinterestedness. As a disinterested love, *agapé* is "a love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbor" (19). This statement paraphrases 1 Cor. 10:24, in which the Apostle Paul implores the Corinthians to consider others, a stance that is a necessary part of the Christian life. Seeking the good of the other is "for the glory of God," according to Saint Paul and King, and King elaborates on why he sees this manifesting in the passive resistance philosophy. He says, "[T]he best way to assure oneself that love is disinterested is to have love for the enemy-neighbor from whom you can expect no good in return, but hostility and persecution" (19). Loving another out of friendship or perceived benefits are examples of self-interested love. Such self-concern, with one's own life or personal flourishing, cannot lead to

*agapé* in its fullest sense. Again, King envisions *agapé* as being unmotivated, distinct from the interested nature of *phileo* or *eros*, both of which require reciprocation.

On human terms, King explains in “An Experiment in Love,” this kind of unselfishness *agapé* love springs “from the *need* of the other person—his need for belonging to the best in the human family” (19, emphasis original). King emphasizes “need,” both by italicizing it and repeating it. In so doing, King alludes to his personalist leanings. To him, humans are united in a network of mutuality, so the other person’s need is to flourish within that network. Otherwise, neither person is who he was meant to be. Only together, fulfilling one another’s need for the other, can human beings belong “to the best in the human family” (19). The one and the many are thus, in King’s theology, inseparably linked.

As an example of this kind of unselfish and unmotivated love, King briefly discusses the parable of the Good Samaritan, a parable he returns to in his later sermon “I See the Promised Land.” There he summarizes Jesus’ story:

One day a man came to Jesus and he wanted to raise some questions about some vital matters of life. At points he wanted to trick Jesus, and show him that he knew a little more than Jesus knew and throw him off base. Now that question could have easily ended up in a philosophical and theological debate. But Jesus immediately pulled that question from midair and placed it on a dangerous curve between Jerusalem and Jericho. And he talked about a certain man who fell among thieves. You remember that a Levite and a priest passed by on the other side; they didn't stop to help him. Finally, a man of another race came by. He got down from his beast, decided not to be compassionate by proxy. But he got down with him, administered first aid, and helped the man in need. Jesus

ended up saying this was the good man, this was the great man because he had the capacity to project the “I” into the “thou,” and to be concerned about his brother. (284)

The Good Samaritan practices what King later refers to as “a kind of dangerous unselfishness” (284), absolutely dependent on the *agapé* motivating his social justice movement. “An Experiment in Love,” however, also emphasizes the human need that the Samaritan was responding to. This need transcended racial and social lines. The man on the Road to Jericho was left for dead. The Samaritan, despite being of a different race, paused and attended to the man. He was undeterred by the animosity between the Jewish people and the Samaritans. No matter their racial or social divides, the injured man’s well-being was tied up in the Samaritan’s own life. He responded to the need that was in front of him without regard for his own concerns, and Jesus, the man that King calls God, deemed this act good.

The Samaritan, of course, is merely a shadow of the ultimate love, which is embodied in Jesus’s self-sacrifice on the cross alluded to in King’s use of Saint Paul. King claims that “God’s love is eternal and fails not because man needs his love. Saint Paul assures us that the loving act of redemption was done ‘while we were yet sinners’—that is, at the point of our greatest need for love” (19). The quote is directly from the Bible, specifically Rom. 5:8, and it continues “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (KJV). While King does not specifically name the atoning act that redeems humanity, his allusion to Romans makes clear his Christian convictions and links his social activism to the most common faith practiced in America at the time of his writing. A majority of his readers, then, would have believed that sin distances God and humankind. On King’s personalist philosophy, with God as the ultimate reality (Beem 128), this distance should be unbearable. And as King’s argument in “Experiment in Love” makes clear,

*agapé* love bridges that gap; it restores people to God. Through that loving action, our value is reaffirmed.

### ***Agapeic Activism***

It is from this conception of *agapé* that King's appreciation for human equality, which of course is a central pillar of his civil rights activism, derives. Obviously, most of King's goals in his political career consist of a pursuit of legal and social equality for oppressed peoples. Most commonly, King pursued justice for African Americans, but he was not single-minded in that quest. Throughout his public life, he worked to end militarism and economic exploitation in America and the world. All of this work was based on his conception of *agapé*. He explains in "An Experiment in Love," "In the final analysis, *agapé* means a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated. All humanity is involved in a single process, and all men are brothers" (20). This truth has applications in all facets of life, including the work against racism and its social strongholds that King was known for.

Even in the face of such evil, King insisted on his commitment to human dignity, a commitment that must have been difficult to retain amid the social conditions in which he fought. White supremacy was still institutionalized, and at the time of this writing, desegregation had stalled. While there is little specific information about preferences for segregation in this period, less than ten years later, nearly 50% of all Americans favored some middle ground between complete integration and segregation, and just over a quarter of the people favored complete integration (Schuman et al. 75). This vaguely pro-segregation attitude was deeply engrained in American society, but by using the term "brother" in the Christian context of *agapé*, King began to work against those racial beliefs. He wove into his rhetoric his firm conviction about the dignity and worth of all human beings, including the ones who so vehemently opposed

him. He was arguing against beliefs about racial superiority and inferiority by saying that everyone is tied together and interrelated.

Importantly, King included both Christians and non-Christians in his vision for social justice, inviting both believers and nonbelievers to participate, insofar as they saw the truth of human dignity. King ends “An Experiment in Love” by turning the conversation away from a specifically Christian conception of love, as a means of extending the movement and sharing God’s love even with those outside the church. He says that “the believer in nonviolence has deep faith in the future,” and this faith allows the resister to accept suffering (20). He knows that the universe is on the side of justice, and he knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship. However, King does not claim that all who believe in the tenets of nonviolent resistance must believe in a personal God, and in fact “there are devout believers in nonviolence who find it difficult to believe in a personal God,” but even these people believe in “some creative force that works for universal wholeness” (20). King is clearly arguing for a belief in some external value structure, and clearly he has his preference, as he developed a Christian construction of love through theological rhetoric. But perhaps here King is allowing space for others to join the movement, likely accepting some of the Secular<sub>2</sub> philosophy Taylor identifies, wherein people still retained a belief in the supernatural even if they didn’t affirm a personalist God, so that the movement is not limited just to Christians.

### ***Pathos* in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”**

King’s commitment to human dignity was necessary to his success as an orator and activist. His embrace of the *imago dei* and his reliance on *agapé* to make sense of human value culminated in a fully developed personalist philosophy, one that was deeply embedded in his life and writings. The persuasive power of this theological truth radiates from King’s appeals to

*pathos* in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.” In this moving argument, King forcefully makes his case for social justice, basing his rhetorical moves on his readers’ anticipated shared belief that disrespecting human value, in whatever form it comes, is inherently wrong. This appeal is most fully felt in King’s explanation for the urgency of the SCLC’s task in Birmingham and throughout the South.

In a key sentence of the letter,<sup>3</sup> King answers his fellow clergymen’s concern that the activists should be patient. In a 316-word, single sentence King provides eleven “when” clauses<sup>4</sup> as answers to why inherent human dignity must be recognized as valuable; he does so by showing the consequences of disregarding it.<sup>5</sup> As Stanley Fish explains, “each ‘when’ clause is presented as a piece of the answer [for why the marchers cannot wait], but is in itself fully sufficient as an answer” (54). Each time, King lessens the need for a logical conclusion; the anecdote described is powerfully emotionally appealing on its own.

King begins by asking the clergymen to consider what they would do if “vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim.” He continues by inviting them to consider how they would respond if “hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters.” These images multiply as the sentence continues. Each “when” clause provides emotional backing through the vivid story it illustrates, and as each clause builds, it creates additional tension, developing the multilayered effects of segregation’s denial of human dignity. When the sentence finally comes to a conclusion, one which Fish calls “spectacularly understated, even quiet, [and] anticlimactic”

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<sup>3</sup> While the entire sentence does have value, its length makes it difficult to justify including in full. This sentence begins “[b]ut when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim” and ends “then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait” (292-93).

<sup>4</sup> Fish notes that these are part of the rhetorical figure called *anaphora*, the repetition of phrases (54).

<sup>5</sup> The technical name for showing the consequences of an act is *descriptio*, a form of *energia* (Lanham 33, 40).

(55), the answer feels obvious: “[T]hen you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.” Ending segregation, this appeal to *pathos* makes abundantly clear, would end the disrespect for human dignity that these stories highlight. Through telling these stories, King affects the emotions of his readers, reaching across racial and social bounds just as the Samaritan did before him, making integration an inherently right option.

King’s storytelling is not limited to the anecdotes in that one sentence; his appeals to *pathos* permeate the letter. King also details the story of how he and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference decided on the demonstration’s date, once again inviting his readers to consider the situation as fellow human beings. He chronicles the reason why he is in the city—“because injustice is here” (290), and as his personalist philosophy demands, he cannot sit idly by and allow it to perpetuate. He appeals to his readers along the same lines, underscoring that they, too, are implicated and affected by the injustice in Birmingham: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” He then explains that negotiations had occurred, yet the promised outcomes had not been honored. This detail corrects the assertion that King is an outside agitator as his initial audience of clergymen suggested (289). It also provides relief, suggesting that the demonstrations were not impulsive. In this way, King appeals to those who feel that segregation does deny human dignity, but thought that care must be taken to effect proper change. King’s story provides *pathos* through the restraint he suggests the demonstrators have shown through their careful deliberations.

This is not to say that King is dispassionate; in fact, King’s passion is evident throughout “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” but that passion is directed towards persuading his audience that human dignity is being disrespected by injustice, something intolerable to clergymen who would prize God’s *agapé* love. The series of “when” clauses is a prime example of such passion,

but that passion is evident whenever King talks about justice and injustice, particularly the misunderstanding of the terms his audience shows. His correction stems from appeals to *pathos*. From suggesting that he “cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham” (290) to implicating the evil that is using just means to achieve unjust ends (301), King shows a passion for correcting injustice and therefore respecting the human person. And his rhetorical appeals work to get his readers on board with his conclusions.

In this passion, King portrays himself as an emotional role model, one his readers would do well to follow. While he has significant passion for correcting the injustice done to the human person, he is dispassionate in his response, suggesting that his answer to the clergymen’s statement will be in “patient and reasonable terms” (289). This letter is not the work of a firebrand who impulsively responds to every criticism; instead, it is a long, nuanced thought of someone who has nothing to do but consider his actions while confined “alone in a narrow jail cell” (302), highlighting that he is motivated by God’s *agapé* love. This modelling of what he would consider the right emotional state encourages the audience to join his cause by appealing to *pathos*, subtly telling readers that they should feel similarly: dispassionate in their physical response and passionate for their cause.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout “An Experiment in Love,” King identifies the history of the nonviolent resistance movement as founded in Gandhian methods but undergirded by his Christian commitment to human dignity. These methods and the basic tenets of the movement King led in Montgomery are all built upon Christian love, especially *agapé*. Resisters, according to King, must exercise a selfless, unmotivated love toward all people, but especially toward those who hate the resisters. In “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” King underscores the importance of

human dignity through his appeals to *pathos*, suggesting that the injustice of segregation and its effects on human dignity should be passionately resisted by anyone who values the human being.

## Defining Sin as Separation: King's Logical Appeal

*But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear. (Isa. 59.2)*

### **Introduction**

If the Christian conception of human dignity is the bedrock and origin of the passive resistance movement, then sin is the force which the movement was resisting. Sin is one of the most fundamental Christian doctrines; it pervades all of creation, warping what God intended. Traditionally, sin has been understood by most Christian theologians as having been introduced to the world through Adam and Eve's disobedience of God when they ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This act of disobedience released evil into the world and tainted all mankind (Bloesch). As a preacher, King was well aware of sin's effects on humanity and the world, and as he worked to improve equality and achieve an end to de jure racism, he encountered overwhelming instances of such sin.

Unlike his conception of humanity dignity, which he mostly systematizes in "An Experiment in Love," King's conception of sin did not emerge out of any single text. Instead, it developed over his lifetime. Throughout his career, King's appreciation for and understanding of sin's pernicious effects in life deepened. As King's career matured, his theological interpretations of the world shifted to follow his experiences: "King's essential understanding of God was not changing, but the moral and ethical implications of his understanding of God were becoming more radical" (Mikelson 2). As his ministry matured, his public writing expressed that changing understanding of God and His works through its focus on different sections of society who

endured the painful effects of sin, such as the American poor and the Vietnamese. Like he did with his conception of human dignity, King introduces in his writings the moral language of sin to focus his audience on the supernatural foundation of their struggle. Instead of fighting their fellow human beings, activists are combatting the forces of evil, channeling their moral frustration in a positive direction. In “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” King draws on appeals to *logos*, developing his arguments about the nature of sin in order to persuade his audience about the source and deeper implications of injustice.

### **King’s Theoretical Conception of Sin and Its Perpetrators**

In “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” King actually defines sin in the most theoretical terms, but the definition is not his own. King writes, “Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation” (293-94). King is an expert on Tillich’s theology. His dissertation, “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman,” devotes a considerable number of pages to clarifying Tillich’s theology, particularly his hamartiology.<sup>6</sup> For King, Tillich’s philosophy seeks to answer man’s existential longings in the Christian faith (*Comparison* 12-13), developing from an explanation that God himself is the ultimate reality. King’s definition of sin originates from this key ontological question. Tillich’s theology, like King’s, grounds reality in the ultimate being of God, and because Man exists as a distinct being from God, “Man is estranged from the ground of his being, from other beings, and from himself” (*Systematic Theology* 44). Tillich asserts that this estrangement, while not a biblical term explicitly, “is implied in most of the biblical descriptions of man’s predicament” (*Systematic Theology* 46). While estrangement does not necessarily entail sin, estrangement is a part of and exacerbated by mankind’s sinful condition.

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<sup>6</sup> Hamartiology is the study of sin.

For Tillich and King, the difference between sin and estrangement is that sin is “the personal act of turning away from that to which one belongs” (*Systematic Theology* 46). Tillich is here emphasizing the personal nature of sin, the distance from that which humanity belongs to. Sin is the specific, willful turning away within estrangement. As mentioned in the previous chapter, humans were created with and bear the *imago dei*, but for Tillich, humanity’s estrangement from God resulted in sin. However, the act of willfully turning away itself is distinct from the individual acts people commit while they are separated from the ultimate source of reality. Tillich goes into detail explaining that “Paul often spoke of ‘Sin’ in the singular and without an article” (*Systematic Theology* 46), suggesting a distinction (albeit a nebulous one) between the state of sinfulness and specific acts of sin. This state of being is what King is emphasizing in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” when he defines sin as separation. Tillich’s authority and systematic theology form a basis for King’s *logos* appeal whereby he identifies racism and segregation as both systemic symptoms and personal practices of sin. Following this logical connection, then, King argues that both of these states are in desperate need of a remedy.

This separation is further explained as the primary consequence of sin in King’s “An Experiment in Love.” While describing the reason that *agapé* was the founding principle of the nonviolent resistance movement, King claims that *agapé* “springs from the *need* of the other person—his need for belonging to the best in the human family” (19). Again, for King and other personalists, human beings exist in a network of mutuality; what one person does affects everyone (Carter 221). Therefore, one ought to do what is best for another in order to improve his or her own condition. This enthymeme suggests an appeal to *logos* that feels almost selfish, yet it results in a universally beneficial result. Anything that separates one person from others and degrades his or her ability to belong within the human family requires *agapé* for

reconciliation. In the case of “An Experiment in Love,” segregation is the primary sin act that calls for such reconciliation, but King’s point is applicable in all cases of sin. By drawing on Tillich’s general understanding of man’s existential state of estrangement and his definition of sin as separation, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” strengthens its appeal to *logos*, reiterating that segregation is part of a larger pattern of injustice.

King and Tillich focus relentlessly on sin as a state of being resulting from humanity’s estrangement from God, but sin also exists in actions, which inevitably result in injustice. Although human beings have a sin nature and are born already estranged from God, they still are marked by the *imago dei*. While people may be estranged from God, every person has the potential to act morally, so not every act is sinful. Instead, Tillich claims, only that which “does not result from faith, from the unity with God” is an expression of sin (*Systematic Theology* 47). Actions can be good, depending on their origin, yet all sinful acts are sinful because they are “an expression of man’s estrangement from God, from men, from himself” (*Systematic Theology* 47). Sin for Tillich manifests in the world as actions that are expressions of the gulf dividing one person from another and, more importantly, from God; King, through his *logos* appeal in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” draws on Tillich’s most basic definition of sin and therefore relies on his implicit authority as a theologian.

It might be easy to assign blame for the acts of sin on the actors themselves. King, however, did not hold such a reductive view. While he did hold those who committed acts of sin to account (he likely would not have written “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” if he thought people were not accountable for their behavior or incapable of change), he did not hold animosity toward them for their actions. His appeal to Tillich’s authority provides a persuasive *logos* to his claim: persons can exacerbate their estrangement from God through their willful

choices, or they can affirm God's *agapé* love and allow God to close the gap. Throughout his writings, King argues that rather than being inherent to the individual or society, evil exists outside of the human person. Even still, wicked forces encourage people to engage in sinful individual decisions. In "An Experiment in Love," the third characteristic of the nonviolent resistance movement that King identifies is that "the attack is directed against the forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing the evil. It is evil that the nonviolent resister seeks to defeat, not the persons victimized by evil" (18). By recognizing that a person is the victim of evil, King implies that evil is not part of his being in the created order, an enthymematic *logos* appeal. People were created good by God, according to King's syllogism; they currently have the capacity for evil. This implies that evil has entered into God's created order from some other force. The outside forces instead goad the person into doing something that expresses his existential estrangement, an action that exacerbates, rather than causes, the separation. Actions can be sinful or good for King; people merely participate in them, willingly participating in the manifestations of sin but not themselves creating sin *ex nihilo*.

### **Manifestations of Sin**

In many of his writings, King links these features of sin to specific aspects of American society that he saw as evil. This is, in fact, the heart of his appeal to *logos*. King painstakingly links the separating mechanism of sin with the racial injustices of mid-century American society. In this way, King's activism speaks to theological realities, not simply material conditions in need of changing. This logical appeal also emphasizes the divine remedy, as it develops from and builds on his pathetic appeal to *agapé* explained in the previous chapter. Just as sin divides the created human being from his creator, King argues, racial injustices—insofar as they are evil—separate human beings from one another. Such logical appeals exemplify the way in which

King's theology is intertwined in his persuasive style, seen especially in "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" and "I See the Promised Land."

Even as these arguments point to the transcendent truths of both human dignity and mankind's turning away from their creator, these texts also reflect King's practical bent, drawn from his life as a minister who tended to his congregation's present, imminent concerns. His theological understandings of sin had real-world implications, and his writings made clear those connections. King was working to improve people's lives in the immanent world, and he saw spreading the gospel as inseparable from that social justice work. His rhetoric embodies that same concern, especially as his arguments point to the injustice and sin of the present world as understood through a broader theological framework. In this way, most of his public writings focus on the concrete manifestations of sin rather than developing a thoroughly systematized hamartiology. These descriptions of concrete practices of sin, then, rely on Tillich's definition of sin as separation, from God and from others, in order to encourage active resistance against these injustices. King's arguments entailed specific social and legal remedies that would reunite Americans across what were then divided cultural and racial lines.

This encouragement typically takes two forms in "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," specifically providing evidence of injustice and appealing to acceptable authorities, both *logos* appeals. In both instances, through his rhetoric, King inextricably links the concrete injustices he saw with the theological truths that give weight to his claims. It is this tight connection between transcendent truth and a specific manifestation of that truth that makes his *logos* appeal highly effective and persuasive. King's evidence of injustice includes the "widely known" brutality, the unjust legal system, and the number of "unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham" (290). King adds to these claims evidence that shows the immorality of demanding

peace when injustice is happening: “you assert that our actions [...] must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn’t this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery?” (295). This question shows the illogic of King’s audience’s assertion that their demonstrations were untimely, providing evidence of the morality of the demonstration in Birmingham and therefore the injustice of resisting it. Each piece of evidence suggests or outright claims injustice, and in claiming injustice, King encourages his audience to believe that activism for justice is right.

King also encourages his audience of the need for activity by responding to the claim that his efforts are unwise (289). He appeals to a wide variety of authorities to support his response, using Minor Prophets and the Apostle Paul to suggest that he has the responsibility to give his message (290); Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for support of offering one’s body as a protest of immoral laws (294); and St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas to define justice and injustice (293) as his biblical and Christian precedents. For an initial audience of clergy, these authorities provide compelling support for King’s actions as he reframes his activism in the Christian tradition. King also appeals to Socrates, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, and Hungarian freedom fighters to further show that supporting the status quo when it is immoral is itself unwise (294-95). These appeals to *logos* all rest on the foundational enthymeme that segregation is sin, sin is separation, and separation must be resisted.

King was not timid about describing the manifestations of sin he saw in the world, particularly later in his life. In an interview for a televised report entitled “After Civil Rights: Black Power,” King told NBC’s Sander Vanocur that American society needed a restructuring of values because “there are three evils in our nation; it’s not only racism, but economic exploitation of poverty would be one and then militarism. And I think in a sense, and in a very

real sense, these three are tied inextricably together, and we aren't going to get rid of one without getting rid of the other" ("MLK Talks" 21:08-21:25). These three evils for King were not simply problems that were occurring in society; they were so deeply rooted and so greatly valued that only a radical upheaval of the status quo could adequately resist them.

### *Racism*

King naturally treats racism and segregation as manifestations of sin throughout his public life, often using *logos* as his primary appeal in his writings on this topic. His initial role as an activist in the civil right movement involved leading the Montgomery Improvement Association during the bus boycott. This boycott was waged in response to the segregation of public transportation, particularly the treatment of African American riders. Because this 1955 demonstration was both King's first leadership role and his first success, he spent more years of his public life arguing and working against segregation and racism than any other manifestation of sin. His opposition to the Vietnam War would not emerge until March of 1965 ("Beyond Vietnam"), and while his concern for poverty was prominent in his Nobel Prize lecture, a real plan for eliminating it was not published until 1967 ("Poverty"). Later, when he sought to expand access to the voting booth in the South, he was doing so for African Americans, once again working to combat racism in public life. While this was not the full scope of King's activism against manifestations of racial sin, it was by far the theme he most consistently returned to.

King likely returned to this theme more frequently than others because it was one he would have experienced daily, especially in his public career. Both his public and private experiences shaped who he was and what he did, so naturally his writings returned to racism. Segregation in the American South at its most basic was racism as public policy. King most

consistently pointed to racism's effect on the human personality as the primary reason he understood it as sinful. He wrote frequently about the effect of racism on the African American, the frustration, bitterness, and hatred it can cause within the hearts of the black men and women who daily struggled against that evil ("Letter" 292-93, 296). This created a logical division between what people ought to be, i.e. loving beings, and what they are, i.e. hateful ones. His eloquence on these effects of racism is undeniable. This contrast between disunity and flourishing develops King's appeal to *pathos*, encouraging his readers to desire communal health over strife. At the same time, this contrast amplifies his appeal to *logos*, by presenting a stark choice between good and evil.

It is this appeal to *logos*, in fact, that speaks most powerfully in King's description of the effects of racism on both white and black people. Through careful rational argumentation, King extends his appeal to *pathos*. After emotionally persuading his readers of the dignity of the human being, he takes that argument to its logical conclusion: social injustice and sin must be resisted through *agapé* and remedied through legal means. In "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," King claims that

[a]ll segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an 'I it' relationship for an 'I thou' relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. ("Letter" 293)

This concern about damage to the personality is deeply rooted in King's personalism. People are loved by God, and God is the ultimate source of being. God's *agapé* love is unmotivated and unprejudiced; He loves all people equally. Denying another person his personhood on the basis

of race, which is what King argues segregation seeks to accomplish, suggests the person who holds racist beliefs disavows God's perfect judgment because the two are not in agreement. Necessarily this creates a separation between God and the person, and as King as already defined, sin is separation. While not every act of segregation was a conscious choice by the person participating in it (segregation was, after all, a systemic issue), the passive acceptance was a state of being in sin for King.

### *Focus Shift*

While King spent much of his early career fighting racism in the public sphere, there is a noticeable shift in his focus after 1963, a shift which shows up in his writings and speeches as well. Throughout the majority of his public career, King mostly concerned himself with racism and its legal, political manifestations. His pursuit of Civil Rights and an end to segregation are both part of this early portion of his career. With the signing of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act in 1964 and 1965 respectively, King achieved federal recognition of his cause and was potentially finished with that portion of his work. After this period, King redirected his focus from the American South to the nation and the world, first working to combat poverty in American society, then militarism and unjust war in Vietnam. He deems these two distinct eras "the era of civil rights" and "the era of human rights" ("Dr. King's Vision").

### *Economic Exploitation*

In 1964, following the Civil Rights Act, King began to signal a shift in his concerns, focusing his efforts against the injustice of economic exploitation of the poor. In this effort, he relied on the same definition of sin as separation and applied it beyond racial lines to consider class divisions. In his Nobel Peace Prize lecture, he says "This problem of poverty is not only seen in the class division between the highly developed industrial nations and the so-called

underdeveloped nations; it is seen in the great economic gaps within the rich nations themselves” (“Poverty”). In suggesting a universal division between economic division, King frames the issue as a human struggle rather than a uniquely American one. This *logos* appeal reframes the issue on more favorable terms. King easily could have made claims about American society exclusively because he was a credible witness to the ills therein, but suggesting that exploitation happens beyond America’s borders as well as within them directs his antagonism to the forces of evil rather than to the American people. His *logos* appeal here helps him be more persuasive, cutting across possibly contentious boundaries like national ones and getting to the essence of his claim.

This crosscutting rhetoric suggests that a shift was already beginning to be seen in King’s approach in 1964, which was further emphasized by his support of the “Freedom Budget” for All Americans in early 1967 (A. Philip Randolph Institute 2). But his commitment to fighting poverty was deepened later that year with planning for the Poor People’s Campaign. This campaign featured another march on Washington, this time on behalf of the nation’s poor. It was King’s signal that he was fully committed to the economic plight of all Americans, not simply African Americans. He embodied here the rhetoric he had begun using in 1964. The aim, like that of the previous March on Washington, was a change in the nation’s laws, to remove the systematic barriers that created the conditions of poverty for individuals. Sadly, King was assassinated before the planned march occurred (“Dr. King’s Vision”).

As part of his political concern, King turned his attention to the black man’s wellbeing in the workplace. His last speech, “I See the Promised Land,” was delivered in support of the Memphis Sanitation Strike in which 1,300 of the city’s garbage collectors went on strike because of the city’s unsatisfactory response to two deaths from unsafe working conditions (“Memphis

Sanitation Workers Strike"). In this speech, King encourages the workers to maintain their strike because doing otherwise, not seeing the action through to the end, would leave them in the same disadvantaged state they were already in. He implies the claim he makes in "An Experiment in Love," that unearned suffering is redemptive (18). He does this through an enthymeme that suggests the difficult protests in Memphis can help save the soul of America, but only if they are carried through.

Highlighting the consequences an abandoned strike would incur reinforces the strong logical appeal at work in this speech. About halfway through it, King sets up a hypothetical ultimatum:

We just need to go around to these stores, and to these massive industries in our country, and say, "God sent us by here, to say to you that you're not treating his children right. And we've come by here to ask you to make the first item on your agenda—fair treatment, where God's children are concerned. Now, if you are not prepared to do that, we do have an agenda that we must follow. And our agenda calls for withdrawing economic support from you. ("I See" 283)

King uses the *logos* appeal of arguing from consequence to persuade his audience to take his demands seriously. If these companies refuse to respect human dignity by mistreating their workers, then those who do respect inherent human worth will have to withhold their business. This ultimatum tells his listeners two things: first, treating God's children poorly is wrong, an enthymeme he implies through his assertion that God sent the protestors to correct an injustice, suggesting that God desires injustice to be corrected; and second, King believes specific remedies are necessary for correcting the sinful act of economic exploitation.

The solution King puts forth logically flows from his consideration of the cause of injustice, further linking his theological underpinnings with his rhetorical appeals. If sin is separation and economic exploitation is one form that separation between mankind can take, reconciliation of that divide can be achieved only if such exploitation is discontinued. After delivering this ultimatum, King offers two practical steps his listeners can take to further the goals of the strike: boycotting companies that practice unfair hiring policies and supporting black businesses ("I See" 283). The two steps suggest a deliberative argument that deeply considered the possible effects of this outcome, allowing King to better make a *logos* appeal of the injustice he was fighting as well as the justice of his own goals. Because sin is by definition separation for King, according to this logic, methods that bring together a community are just.

Egregious policies that King rallied against include companies not hiring qualified African Americans and limiting the positions available for African American candidates. Such policies naturally divide a people into groups, furthering their separation from one another and encouraging disunity and discord. For these reasons, King claims that the companies' policies are unfair and demand redress. For King, as he makes clear in his appeals to *logos*, even something as simple as practicing unfair hiring policies separates people from the desired network of mutuality. Within King's theological framework this action is sin because it harms all involved.

### *Militarism*

This same concern with sin's separation of human beings from one another and from their creator motivated King's arguments against militarism. In his writings he relies on the same appeals to *logos* to rationally develop this connection and call for rectification. While King does recognize war as a fact of life, he argues against the Vietnam War in particular because of the

economic and social imbalances it relied on. For King, the Vietnam War was a manifestation of sin because of its effects on the American and Vietnamese people. For America, the Vietnam War used “men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube” (“A Time to Break Silence” 233). King argues that the war was focusing American money and skill away from social uplift programs that the Civil Rights Movement and the Poor People Campaign were creating, and redirecting those resources into the business of killing. As all people are connected within the network of mutuality, this redirection would have been doubly disappointing for King, directing funds and emotional energies away from Civil Rights issues where he thought they would do more good. Additionally, the death toll of Vietnam climbed exponentially as the 1960s closed.<sup>7</sup> For King, whose worldview is at least partially founded on the inherent dignity of the human person, these killings would have been tragic, especially because he did not see the war as just. The decoupling of the war from justice was partially the cause of its evil.

Of course, King was looking beyond the experience of American soldiers in the war. He, like many antiwar activists, also considered the effect on the Vietnamese. In the same way he links racial injustice at home with the theological truths of human dignity and the separating effects of sin, King describes the horrific connection between the Vietnamese experience of the war and rank acts of injustice: “This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation’s homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love” (“A Time” 241). Participation in war, particularly the war in Vietnam, damaged others and limited their flourishing, and because all people are connected to every other person, this damage

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<sup>7</sup> According to US Archives statistics, in 1964 there were 216 American deaths, 1,928 in 1965, 6,350 in 1966, 11,363 in 1967, and 16,899 in 1968.

affected everyone. It was unloving, unjust, and unwise to participate in the war in Vietnam for King, and though he was less vocal about this evil than the previous two manifestations of sin, he felt no less strongly about it.

While he certainly valued the individual lives of both those at home and abroad, the primary reason that King saw the war as a manifestation of sin in American society was the militarism that undergirded it. Teasing this feature of the Vietnam War out is the heart of King's appeal to *logos* in his anti-war writings. The central tenet of these arguments—that such oppression and exploitation widen the divide between people and is an affront to human dignity—tracks those he uses against racism and economic exploitation, showing a remarkably consistent theology that grounds his rhetoric. Militarism at its most basic is the use of a strong military force to support national interests. Inherently, militarism prioritizes specific national interests over the general welfare. In Vietnam, this meant government suppression of perceived communist sympathies in America and supporting dictators abroad (King, "A Time" 235-36). By repressing Vietnamese independence, "those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable" (John F. Kennedy qtd. in King "A Time," 240). King argues that by authorizing military force as the primary mode of maintaining national interests, the US ironically is destroying itself and others by creating conditions in Vietnam and across the region for rebellion, revolution, and greater war.

For King, this destruction essentially meant denying human interdependence. For him, people are "tied in a single garment of destiny" ("Letter" 290), and the inability to recognize another's need and help meet it meant harming one's own self-interest. Militarism's elevation of national interest encouraged self-centeredness and unconcern with the other. Such a belief and practice cannot help but harm the person holding to the ideology. Just as King describes the

sinful act of segregation as turning what should be an “I-Thou” relationship into an “I-It” relationship, militarism similarly replaces a healthy relationship between people with a relationship between person and thing, but on a geopolitical level rather than an interpersonal one. This replacement does harm to the militaristic person and the entire human family through their inability to see others as fully equal to themselves.

## **Results**

This is what ties King’s fight against racism, economic exploitation, and militarism together: the damage in each system done to the human person and the human community. King describes the outcome of the sinful act of segregation as follows: “the white man’s personality is greatly distorted by segregation, and his soul is greatly scarred” (“Experiment” 19). Here, we begin to understand the practical and transcendent results of King’s vision of sin become apparent. Participating in sin damages the personality and scars the soul. Appealing to Tillich’s definition of sin in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” to amplify his *logos* appeal suggests King’s argument has universal purchase. By situating racism, militarism, and greed within a broader theological framework and identifying the root issue in each as the separation of people, King strengthens his rhetorical appeal. This appeal functions so well because King repeatedly links the particular with the universal. For example, in “An Experiment in Love,” King singles out “the white man” who serves as an avatar for all those who are implicated in injustice and are called to resist the social structures that degrade and devalue the less powerful. King relies on an enthymeme for readers to fill in that link. Because people exist within a network of mutuality, separation, he implies, makes them less able to be who they are supposed to be. His ultimate conclusion, one that draws from his appeal to *pathos* and extends in his appeal to *logos*, is that no person can be who he or she is supposed to be at all while injustice is in the land.

King's personalist ideology imbues his rhetoric with a logic that is particularly compelling to an audience that wants both a concern for the present conditions and answers to their existential longings. King's Christian faith helps him appeal to the Christian conception that all human beings have dignity because they are loved by God and judged as good by Him. People are image bearers of the personal God, which makes His divine will and goodness available—and desirable—to all. Damaging that personality through the separation of sin would hurt the individual's ability to understand what was actually best for him or her according to King, but it also hurts the ability to work for the good of the human family. King uses the example of white men's refusal of federal aid for education to avoid "giving the Negro his rights" as proof of this deep damage ("Experiment" 20). This lack of good discernment harms the community and the self simultaneously as "whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly" ("Letter" 290). That people logically want to protect themselves is thus the crux of King's appeal when he claims that racism is harmful. That this self-protection also causes others to improve is a helpful consequence in King's argument.

But King's concern is not merely on the imminent; he also mentions that the white man's "soul is greatly scarred" by segregation, and therefore by sin. This appeal to a logical desire beyond present conditions, the transcendent needs of soulcraft, helps King tap into the underlying concerns of Taylor's Secular<sub>3</sub> society. King believed that people were originally created by God as an indivisible unit of will, according to Bertocci (Carter 219), and in the Christian creation story, God called this unit good (Gen. 1:31). Since that creation, though, sin was introduced into the world, so the ability to act sinfully became a possibility. In participating in sinful acts like segregation, King claims that the soul is damaged, even scarred.

## Conclusion

From resisting segregation to protesting poverty and war, Martin Luther King often relied on a well-grounded understanding of sin. This concept was central to his public writings and activism. While he never systematized his conception of sin, his doctoral studies of Paul Tillich affected him deeply, allowing him to see the separation, both from God and from others, that sin caused for individuals. Such considerations pervade his writings, especially “An Experiment in Love,” “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” and “I See the Promised Land.” In these writings, his argument relies heavily on an appeal to *logos* as he explains the consequences of sin and rationally advocates that his audience and readers resist the injustices that led to these.

This articulation of questions of social injustice in spiritual terms gives them transcendent weight. No longer are such trivial pursuits as earning as much money as possible good merely because Americans live in a capitalist society. Instead, King invites readers to look beyond ourselves, participate in the human family, and value the truly good, appealing to the logical, transcendent longings for closeness with each other and with God. If human beings are meant to be with God—if human flourishing is dependent on that—then what is best for all people is a transcendent focus. King’s injection through his *logos* appeals to Tillich and the Christian faith of the deeply moral language of sin into the political conversation concerning segregation, economic exploitation, and militarism gives his message a weight and fullness of meaning that wholly immanent language would lack.

## Enacting Justice: King's Appeal to Character

*“Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Execute true justice, Show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart against his brother.’” (Zech. 7.9-10)*

In “I See the Promised Land,” King asserts that change is in the land. He begins this speech by describing a hypothetical offer from the Almighty: “Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?” (279). As he contemplates whether he would like to live in Egypt (presumably during the age of pharaohs), the promised land of Israel, Greece during the lives of Plato and company, the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, the lifetime of his namesake Martin Luther, or the days of Abraham Lincoln, he opts for the latter half of twentieth century, even though it is a controversial choice. Despite the nation being sick, filled with trouble and confusion, he claims to see “God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding—something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up” (280). And he clearly wants to participate in that movement. Such a vision of history exemplifies King’s immersion in the pursuit of justice, his willingness not only to advocate for change but also to work to achieve it. All of this lends credibility to his rhetorical appeals for others to join him in this work.

This appeal to *ethos* saturates King’s writings, most especially as he urges listeners and readers to embrace the difficult work of justice themselves. By calling attention to the sacrifices he has made and the commitment he has to the cause, he shows how fully he believes in and has surrendered himself to God’s righteousness. He testifies to the experiences of God’s

righteousness that he himself has witnessed, and in so doing, King demonstrates virtue and goodwill toward his audience and a hope that they, too, will embrace God's will for redemption and participate in the work he saw God doing in the world. In his public writings, King argues that the people can and are participating in God's work in some way, using appeals to *ethos* to bolster the pursuit of righteousness shared by himself and his audience as the basis for his active pursuit of justice.

### **King's Biblical Precedent**

King's vision for righteousness is thoroughly biblical, relying especially on the Old Testament prophet Amos. One of King's most quoted passages is Amos 5:24: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream" (American Standard Version). He famously uses it in a key section of his March on Washington speech ("I Have" 219), cites it again in "A Christmas Sermon on Peace" (258), and quotes it directly in "I See the Promised Land" (282). Importantly, Amos' emphasis throughout the scriptural text is on the social aspect of justice, its practical import in the here and now. In this way, King's vision of justice aligns with his articulation of human dignity and sin and further emphasizes his personalist vision of the network of mutuality. By appealing to the moral precedent of the Biblical prophet Amos, King clearly aligns his goals with God's plans of ultimate justice for the nations.

Relying heavily on Amos to build his case for social justice also highlights the standard King holds for righteousness, as he submits himself to that same standard. Amos was an eighth century BCE prophet, one of the twelve Minor Prophets featured in the Old Testament. His work took him from the life of a shepherd in Judah to Israel ("Amos"). There, he preached destruction of the kingdom because of its systematic oppression of the poor. For Amos, God's absolute sovereignty "required justice for rich and poor alike" (*Britannica*). Like each of the Minor

Prophets, Amos “concentrated [his] preaching on confronting the sins of [his] culture and instructing the people about how to live in faithfulness and obedience to the Lord” (Fuhr and Yates, xiv). His writings, along with Micah’s, focused on economic and social injustice, making it clear that “God hates corruption and ill-gotten gain made at the expense of the powerless” (Fuhr and Yates 22). Here, Amos’ influence on King begins to become clear.

Importantly, King, like Amos, called for repentance. Evil practiced for personal gain is hateful to God, according to the Minor Prophets, but they did not preach merely destruction; they also offered hope. “Along with calling the people to repentance and announcing the coming judgment when repentance did not occur, it was the mission of the prophets to proclaim coming restoration and to offer hope” (Fuhr and Yates 15). The reminder of the consequences of transgressing God’s righteousness served primarily to highlight the respite from judgment made possible through embracing holiness. Bolstering that message was King’s own embracing of righteousness, which his example demonstrated was a means of hope for salvation and restoration. Amos frames this restoration as the coming of the Day of the Lord, a day which Israel should fear but which also meant the restoration of the Davidic line through re-establishment of the throne of the unified Israel (Fuhr and Yates 129). While Israel may fail to meet its promises, God, according to Amos, will meet His, replacing the culture of corruption He views as unjust with a culture of justice and righteousness. Like these prophets who were willing to enter into the sinful lands God charged them with to offer redemption, King’s activism took him into the political realm, allowing him to offer a better way forward and suggesting a goodwill towards his audience.

### ***Tsēdeqah* and *Mishpat* Considered**

As Amos exemplified and King repeated, righteousness and justice are intertwined; the one calling for justice must himself submit to God’s righteousness. King’s preference for Amos 5:24 (“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream”) emphasizes this interconnection, both through its parallel structure and rhetorical flourishes and its nuanced understanding of justice and righteousness. This *exergasia*<sup>8</sup> reinforces the underlying virtue of righteousness at the center of Amos’ exhortation; King’s foregrounding it in his speeches emphasizes, then, King’s own *ethos*. The parallel structure also encourages listeners to consider the similarities and the difference between these terms. In fact, describing one without using the other is difficult in English. Justice is “maintenance of what is just or right by the exercise of authority or power” (“Justice”), and righteousness is the state of “acting or disposed to act rightly or justly” (“Righteous”). The Hebrew forms, however, make the distinction between actions and a state of being signified by the words more apparent, illuminating helpful nuances in the words that underscore and integrate King’s mission and method for social justice.

In Hebrew, the word that is consistently translated as righteousness in Amos 5:24 is *tsēdeqah*, the feminine noun of *tsēdeq*. *Tsēdeq*’s root, TS-D-Q, means “to be righteous,” making it a stative verb, though it does have the potential to be made active (*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 3 746). It indicates “right behavior or status in relation to some standard,” highlighting the importance of natural law (*New International Dictionary* 746). For Amos and the Minor Prophets, “the most important spheres for righteousness were the relationship between Yahweh and Israel and the relationship of men in the social order” (John Luther Mays, qtd. in *New International Dictionary* 763). In Amos, TS-

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<sup>8</sup> “Repeating the thought in many figures” (Lanham 49).

D-Q operates within the human sphere, though with norms established by God; the wealthy must not abuse the poor because God commands the care of His creations (*New International Dictionary* 763). The prophet connects *tsēdeqah* with issues of social injustice, especially economic inequality and abuse, as a way of making the social order fairer. This is likely why King was so drawn to Amos. In this verse from Amos, *tsēdeqah* is the state of being in accordance with a standard in relationships, whether with God or humans.

For King and for Amos, *tsēdeqah* cannot be separated from *mishpat*, typically translated as justice, though occasionally it is translated as judgment. *Mishpat* is the masculine noun form of ŠPT; its root means “to judge.” ŠPT “describes a range of actions that restore or preserve order in society, so that justice, especially social justice, is guaranteed” (*New International Dictionary*, vol. 4 214). These actions include the following: (a) establishing or maintaining justice, (b) passing judgment on or punishing, (c) judging or settling legal disputes among the people, and (d) ruling and governing. Unlike *tsēdeqah*, *mishpat* is rooted in a predominantly active verb, making it about the activity of justice. While clearly the verb can be nominalized, the emphasis remains on the act. Sixty percent of Old Testament usage of the verb describes human activity, and the other forty percent describes divine activity (*New International Dictionary* 214). Rather than being a state of being like *tsēdeqah*, *mishpat* is active, requiring persons to enact justice. This difference speaks to necessary nuances in King’s *ethos*, as he reminds listeners that any who work for justice must submit themselves to righteousness. Throughout his writings, King humbly presents himself as a role model for his audience to follow and invites them to join him on this mission.

While it is entirely possible that Amos merely emphasizes the value of justice through his rhetoric in this passage,<sup>9</sup> he also speaks to a distinction that King draws upon. Through the book of Amos, justice is a major theme, particularly the injustice the poor of Israel are experiencing. This injustice has caused the Lord to send his prophet to call for repentance and has separated the people from their Lord. In response to their separation, He is offering His people a choice: punishment or atonement. Justice will spare the people from this reckoning by invoking God's mercy, and in enacting justice, separation between God and his people lessens, creating a state of righteousness. Ultimately, that is the offer King gives America. Just as Amos saw the Israel of his day living with economic injustice, King saw his America living with racial injustice, and he offered the nation the same choice: reconciliation or death.

### **King's Vision of Righteousness**

King's vision of righteousness entails the means of the fight against injustice. King's specific definition rests on natural law because of his personalist ideology and his Christian foundations: "According to both the Scholastics and Personalists, natural law consists of one body of moral truths which are universal and immutable" (Rathbun 46). King provides a clear example of the need to align both individual actions and social structures to this standard: "On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway" ("Time" 241). This is accomplished, for King, by envisioning oneself as intimately tied to the community of which he is a part, a step he first takes himself. In this way, King

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<sup>9</sup> This seems like a reasonable answer because most of the references to justice in the book are followed by a parallel reference to righteousness, which reinforces the underlying virtue inherent in the terms.

integrates his theology with his activism and his rhetoric. His public writings demonstrate how inseparable these are.

In “An Experiment in Love,” King describes the goal of the nonviolent resistance as winning the opponent’s friendship and understanding. As a nonviolent resistor himself, King lends this claim credibility through his intrinsic *ethos*. In this text, he is trying to be understood rather than attacking his audience for their opposition, earning their friendship. Here, King uses *phronesis*<sup>10</sup> as his support because he is describing the philosophical underpinnings of the movement he has led. This is the same piece in which he describes the civil rights movement as being founded upon Christian love, in this case friendship in particular. Such friendship, as explained by Thomas Aquinas, demands that righteous people work together toward the virtuous life, refraining from actions that would further separate. In “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” King would refine his terms, focusing more on the concept of brotherhood than friendship. In doing so, he aligns his aim of justice with his conceptions of dignity and sin. This use of brotherhood is a common Christian reference, rooted in Biblical language. As the Book of Matthew says, “whosoever shall do the will of my [Jesus’] Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Matthew 12:50, KJV). Including “brotherhood” in the definition of righteousness allows King to root his definition in more sacred terms than “friendship” previously had, again suggesting King’s goodwill, even for those who oppose his cause.

In addition to the Christian aspect of the term, King’s rhetorical shift suggests a changing view of the movement’s end in King’s estimation. King’s initial use of friendship as the method and aim of the Civil Rights movement suggests a desire for a positive, reciprocal relationship,

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<sup>10</sup> Practical wisdom (*Nichomachean Ethics* 1142a).

considering the way Aristotle characterized friendship in *Nichomachean Ethics* as a relationship that is acknowledged by both parties. But for King it did not matter that those who opposed equality for African Americans thought themselves separate from those who did. Instead, King shifts to the use of brotherhood to reflect his belief that all people, no matter their personal stance or hatred, are inextricably linked by a network of mutuality. In “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” King advocates for universal justice based on his commitment to human dignity as the lodestar of righteousness. Upholding another’s dignity is the measure of righteousness and the means to justice; denying it is the path to destruction. In this way, King’s argument tracks that of Amos. This value shows King’s virtue; appealing to it gives his activity, both written and lived, a persuasive *ethos*. The goal of the nonviolent resistance movement may well have been brotherhood, but whether or not those goals materialize, *agapé* must absolutely remain.

Part of the value of a righteous world for King was the respect that humans would ideally have for each other, a fact that he maintained, lived, and demonstrated throughout his public career, establishing an extrinsic *ethos* that he brought into his writings. In “An Experiment in Love,” King writes about how *agapé* seeks a harmonious whole, how it works to reconcile the cleavage that hate creates (20). As harmony is achieved, righteousness becomes the standard interaction, and “[u]ltimately, that harmony extends to King’s eschatological vision of ‘the beloved community’ in which human worth is fully and universally acknowledged” (Beem 128).

The creation of this Beloved Community was absolutely central to King’s philosophy and worldview. It is a culmination of his view of human dignity, his understanding of sin, and his goal for justice. In the concept of the Beloved Community, all of King’s rhetoric, theology, and activism finds its fullest expression. The term was created by Josiah Royce, a twentieth century theologian, but King and his followers popularized the term (The King Center). Originally,

Royce used the Beloved Community as a shorthand for the idyllic, redeemed Kingdom of God on earth, but King's vision was far more practical. It was a world in which all people were committed to the principles of nonviolence, a world without hunger or poverty or any sinful things because all people were loyal to each other. King's vision of the Beloved Community naturally grew out of his personalism: "Nonviolent personalism had as its goal the beloved community because 'person' is always person-in-community and community is lock-stitched into the institutional structures and procedures of society" (Carter 221). If all people recognize their interrelatedness, then they will work towards a more righteous society, inevitably creating King's Beloved Community. This end seems to be King's purpose in "Letter from Birmingham City Jail." And his appeal to *ethos* as he communicates this vision furthers his argument's persuasive power. For example, while he is disappointed in his fellow clergymen, he never speaks to them as though they are beneath him or as enemies. Instead, he displays that he believes that they are merely misguided in their understanding of his activities; he seems to believe that once they rightly understand the demonstration's purpose is justice, then they will accept, and possibly even participate in, the protests.

All of these facets of King's righteousness are wholly relational, which is doubly meaningful considering *tsēdeqah*'s inherently relational meaning and King's personalist bent. As mentioned in the chapter on human dignity, personalism has its origins in the relational philosophy of Martin Buber, which King specifically references in "The Letter from Birmingham City Jail." This quote was discussed in the previous chapter on sin, but it follows from segregation's "I-It" effect that a righteous world is comprised of exclusively "I-Thou" interpersonal relationships. If sin reduces a person, then righteousness correctly appraises that person's worth. For King through Buber, rightly appraising another person requires projecting

into the other person a “Thou” status (“I See” 284). This projecting gives the other person the ability to respect his or her own uniqueness after being drained of it by sinful acts like segregation (“Letter” 296). This is an appeal to virtue, emphasizing that King values human dignity and will be rightly offended by acts that disrespect it, such as segregation. By placing himself on the same level with his audience, he subtly implies that they, too, believe the same things and, if they do not, encourages them to assent to this truth. In this way, his appeals to *ethos* intertwines with his theological belief that men are in fact brothers and embodies this truth by overtly affirming it.

### **King’s Vision of American Justice**

#### *Foundations*

King’s use of *ethos* appeals to make his case that justice requires a vision of brotherhood is inseparable from the American conditions he was speaking to. Part of King’s goals for the nonviolent resistance movement is related to correcting those distorted racial relationships left by sin and undergirded by systemic social structures that reinforce that oppression. In this way, working for justice requires understanding who a person is in his cultural context and what specific remedies are required to value people rightly. Identifying these specifics is, for King, the foundation of righteousness. In working toward true righteousness, one must account for the particularity of the person and act in such a way so as to meet those needs. King’s writings, therefore, are rooted in these particularities even while they find significance in the transcendental truths of his theological framework. For this reason, King repeatedly proposes specific fixes for the American system that he thought would right the evils of sin.

Just as King viewed righteousness as contextualized within relationships but having some universal foundations, his understanding of justice had general bases that influenced what

specific actions might be taken. The most prominent of these foundations was naturally active because, as previously explained, for King justice must be active. While some may have understood the nonviolent resistance movement as “passive resistance” (“Experiment” 18), King makes clear that the resister’s “mind and emotions are always active, constantly seeking to persuade his opponent that he is wrong” (“Experiment” 18). Persuasion thus requires intentionality, directed toward specific ends. King foregrounded this intentionality in his call to end segregation on Montgomery’s public transportation but would expand beyond Alabama to fight multiple sins.

In “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” King highlighted this need for intentionality by lamenting the white church congregations’ paralysis and praising those congregants who separated from their churches in order to participate in the protests in Birmingham and elsewhere. “I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom,” he says (300). Such language emphasizes the need for allies in the pursuit of righteousness and subtly highlights that he himself has willingly been such an ally. He continues this rhetorical pattern throughout his speeches, calling for specific sacrifices that he himself has taken. All of this is aimed at his goal of brotherhood, which has social and economic implications. In “I See the Promised Land,” for example, he reminds his audience that their external actions must be anchored in economic withdrawal (282). Boycotts, then, are inherently active and reiterate the bonds between human beings, and in his last speech, King is reminding his audience that economics can forcefully influence those in power to correct inequality.

The reason King saw economic withdrawal as a necessary part of his work towards justice was his belief that justice was not inevitable. While King believed that ultimate justice

would be enacted by God, human beings are invited to participate in that work. And his writings explicitly extend this invitation. This is the thrust of his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”:

“Such an attitude [that justice marches inexorably forward] stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively” (“Letter” 296). That entire essay is a response to those who tell King and his followers to wait. King, however, felt that waiting was not an option, and if justice was to come, it would arrive through the work of those who used time constructively and participated in God’s bending the arc of the moral universe towards justice.

Another foundational aspect of King’s vision of justice is the need for creation, and this facet of his theology also shows up in his writings as part of his appeals to *ethos*. *Agapé* love is a creative force, restoring what sin corrupts, an argument King makes clear in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.” Importantly, there is always an opportunity for this creative work of love: “We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right” (296). Again, such language points to the need for specific action that is undergirded by transcendent truth. Just acts which further righteousness are part of the use of time for creative ends for King, and through these acts, “our pending national elegy” can be transformed “into a creative psalm of brotherhood” (296). The nation’s death at the hands of inequality can be changed, but only through action by those who participate in the same traditions of righteousness as Jesus, Amos, Paul, and politicians like Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln (297). These figures reshaped the world, and King’s claiming them gives his urge for creative acts a powerful *ethos* appeal. By drawing on them, he inserts himself into the same tradition, encouraging his audience to judge his actions by their standards, creating an intrinsic *ethos*. The appeal to Christ

in particular makes King's claim to moral goodness one that stretches beyond the immanent into the infinite and the universally true, powerfully compelling the audience to act as King does.

King recognized that a loving spirit was not sufficient for creating righteousness. The methods mattered, too, and the methods he promoted emphasized his ethical appeal. To the clergymen who attacked the Birmingham protestors about the way their protests were progressing, King wrote, "the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends" ("Letter" 301). Immorality generally causes violence to the soul, and King's concern is holistic. The whole person and society must be healed if each person is to be whom they were meant to be, and violence cannot do that necessary work. King even labels it as "impractical" because it multiplies the hate in the universe ("Experiment" 17). Acts of justice must be rooted in the healing power of love to effect actual change.

This *agapé* love demanded that the activist must love others despite their hatred, a key principle that dominated King's career. His book *Strength to Love* is predicated on the power of love to effect justice: "Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that" (37). His goal is not to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but rather to seek togetherness, which King argues occurs through unearned suffering. "What is the nonviolent resister's justification for this ordeal to which he invites men, for this mass political application of the ancient doctrine of turning the other cheek?" he rhetorically asks. "The answer is found in the realization that unearned suffering is redemptive" ("Experiment" 18). Loving someone to friendship, and even more so to brotherhood, despite their hatred requires a willingness to endure suffering, like the hoses and batterings of the segregationists ("Letter" 301). Through the African Americans' suffering, new community begins to emerge, healing the separation that divided peoples.

*Justice in Action*

Central to King's social justice program, and evidence of his being influenced by the prophet Amos, is his understanding of justice as needing both individual effort and societal change. Individual effort can be many things, but King, as a leader of the people rather than a politician, was focused primarily on the society-level changes. For him, individual efforts were directed toward the transformation of systems. In many cases, this effort was economic withdrawal. Think of the Bus Boycotts and the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike, both of which he participated in and encouraged. These protests relied on King's vision of the brotherhood of man and worked by spreading the pain caused by sin from one hurting group to those who were profiting from it through individuals making individual choices ("I See" 283). In other cases the protests were about making the pain of sin visible, which the protesters accomplished by presenting their bodies as a means of making a case for justice. The violence done to them was merely symptomatic of the spiritual violence already being done to African Americans.

The final end of the nonviolent movement that King saw as an act of justice was the general reform of national policy. In "The Letter from Birmingham City Jail," King claimed that "[n]ow is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity" (296). Racial injustice was distorting human personality, of which King cites Buber's philosophy as evidence. As a correction of that sinful state, national policy must be lifted in such a way that recognizes the value of the individual person. The specific national policy King was envisioning at the time of writing was general integration, but his emphasis on injustice suggests that the creation of policies that are founded on respect for the person is his most valued goal. He intended this social change to be made at the political level, as he says in

“Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” “sameness made legal” (294). Public policy changes are systemic changes, and in the nonviolent resistance movement, individual effort helped create social justice.

King captured both senses—individual effort and systemic change—in his use of The Good Samaritan, discussed earlier in relation to King’s understanding of *agapé*. King prominently cites this story of a man who rescues another man in need regardless of his ethnicity in both “I See the Promised Land” and “A Time to Break Silence,” each for a different purpose. In the former, King encourages individual action, saying the Samaritan asked, “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?” (285). King identifies the Samaritan as good because of his unselfishness, ignoring the dangers the Jericho road presented to him to help his fellow creature. His purpose here is encouraging individual action for individual justice.

In “A Time to Break Silence,” this purpose gets reversed, though the context remains the same. King uses the Good Samaritan, a familiar parable to his audience of clergy, as a call for an increase of society-level changes. He explicitly makes this distinction: “On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway” (241). Yes, King argues, the compassionate act of helping the hurt individual is good, but the system that allows the beating also requires reconstruction. Both individual action and collective change are necessary aspects of justice one must consider as he or she works towards righteousness.

## **Conclusion**

Why does King’s vision of justice matter in a world existentially separated by sin from God? Why is justice important beyond simply making everyone equal? King’s reasoning is that

human beings are not alone in this quest for justice. And his rhetorical appeals that rely on biblical precedent make this connection clear. By linking his vision of justice to biblical principles, King also positions himself as under the same righteous standard. He always points to God as the source of any goodness achieved. God, ultimately, is the one effecting righteousness throughout the cosmos. From the beginning of his public career, King claimed that the nonviolent resister “knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship” (“Experiment” 20), which King defines as his personal God.

Because King believes so fully in the reality of justice, he is willing to sacrifice himself for that cause and call on his audience to enter that same sacrifice. In “I See the Promised Land,” King says that “[I]ike anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will” (286). King's entire public career until the moment he gave this speech had been in the pursuit of justice. He brought that public career into this speech, appealing to his extrinsic *ethos*. He is proud of all the work he has seen done, works that ended segregation and gave African Americans civil rights, works that aroused the conscience of the nation, works of justice that increased the share of righteousness all people had. If King, after reflecting on all he and the movement he led had done for justice, claimed that he wants to do God's will, he saw that God's will was justice, and he wanted to share in that work because it was good, an implicit claim of the virtue of his actions, appealing to *ethos* to persuade his audience to desire the same.

## Claiming Hope: King's Embodied Theology

*Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Rom. 5.5)*

### **Introduction**

King's concern for and activism against injustice defined his public career and persona in American minds. His work and outpouring of speeches and texts sought to address the three evils of racism, militarism, and poverty. Yet today King is primarily known for his anti-segregation work, likely because his work in the latter two areas was significantly less successful than the movement which encouraged and won sweeping public policy changes like the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act. Those two acts represented the final bookend of King's public victories; afterward, he would be ostracized for his criticism of the Johnson administration and the Vietnam War, losing the support of more than 60% of Americans (West 335). Facing such constant overwhelming challenges while experiencing little success tempted King to despair, yet his sturdy theology of human dignity, sin, and justice made possible a continued hope. This hope made its presence felt throughout his writings, and is especially evident in "Letter from Birmingham City Jail." In this masterpiece of rhetoric, King intertwined his theology with his appeals to *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos*, demonstrating how his life, work, and faith were all of a piece.

This fully developed practical theology was shown to be all the more powerful as it enabled King to withstand severe challenges and even thrive in the face of them. Some of King's close friends and confidants noted a shift in his demeanor in the final years of his life. The

testimony of Andrew Young, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) from 1964 until 1970, is one of the most illuminative: “he was given to a kind of depression that he had not had earlier...he was spiritually exhausted” (qtd. in West 325). King’s depression was doubtless connected to his changing and deepening understanding of the implications of sin, with its deep entrenchment in American society through the Vietnam War, poverty, and social injustices. For these reasons, King called America a “‘sick, neurotic nation’ unwilling to be truthful about itself” (West 326).

Despite seeing an unwillingness in the nation to enact justice, King continued with his activism in the faith that change would come. He believed that one day the nation would “get to the Promised Land” by fulfilling the promises of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The documents offered a promise, yet they also failed to meet that promise; however, King believed that the failure was not permanent, but rather held a not-yet-fulfilled, forthcoming victory for freedom and justice. When the nation finally chooses to stand up as co-workers with God for “the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage” (“Letter” 302), the Founding Fathers’ ideals of freedom and equality would be made real, which King held as a not-yet-fulfilled certainty. While other contemporary thinkers, like W. E. B. Du Bois, believed in the possibility of American change until their nihilism overtook their hope and ended that belief (West 326), King’s hope sustained him and his activism until the very end of his career. King, unlike those other thinkers, founded his hope in the conviction that humanity was not alone in its pursuit of justice and that God’s work of redemption was incomplete but also inevitable, a truth which allowed him to claim confidently that “we, as a people, will,” *not might*, “get to the Promised Land” (“I See” 286). In “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” King, drawing on appeals to each of the three major rhetorical categories, develops his arguments about the nature of hope

in order to persuade his audience that hope was not only warranted, but also necessary to continue the work of love.

### **Despair and Fear**

Many of King's efforts after his initial success in Montgomery were unsuccessful at achieving the desired ends. The protest he led in Albany, Georgia, in 1961, for example, was aimed at ending "all forms of racial segregation in the city," but when he ceased his involvement and effectively ended the protest, few gains had actually been made ("Albany"). His Chicago Campaign and the Poor People's Campaign met with similar disappointing ends, though King did not live to see the results of the latter.<sup>11</sup> His favorability rating among Americans dropped in the course of a year from 45% in 1965 to 33% the following year while his disapproval rating shot from 46% to 63% in the same timeframe ("Americans Divided"). This decline corresponded both with his broadening opposition and his decreasing rate of success in achieving his goals. As King was becoming more radical in his pursuit of justice by calling out America's militarism and rejecting economic exploitation, he achieved less and was disliked more. Such a disparity between his vision and results tempted King to despair.

Temptation to despair was not new for King, but it certainly became a much greater temptation as his life progressed. Forgotten promises were, for King and African Americans in the South, part of life: "We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights" ("Letter" 292). American society seemed to promise that justice for slavery and segregation was coming, but it had not yet materialized. By attaching himself to the centuries-long struggle for inherent rights through his use of "we," King develops his own credibility,

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<sup>11</sup> King's death in April 1968 occurred just over a month before the Poor People's Campaign began. King's friend Ralph Abernathy and his widow Coretta Scott King took charge and led the demonstration. This demonstration lasted only 43 days, ending without achieving its legislative goal of an economic bill of rights ("Poor People's Campaign").

establishing *ethos* with his readers. King is not merely a bystander; he is himself struggling against America's denial of this promise to African Americans, making himself more credible through the suggestion that he has suffered, too. This appeal to thwarted desire, particularly indicating the length of time that it has been blocked, encourages the reader to feel the frustration King and his ancestors have felt.

King willingly enters into Birmingham, a place where justice has yet to be fulfilled, bolstering his letter's appeal to *ethos*. Both he and the rest of the African American community had been disappointed by failures of justice in the past, even as recently as the previous September (290), yet they persisted in their fight. This acknowledgement of his experience appeals to King's *ethos*, highlighting his practical wisdom, *phronesis*, yet despite his previous frustrations, he continues to work for justice. This credibly establishes King as a realist. He has hope in his ability to affect the world, but he also knows, and possibly even suspects, that he will be frustrated once more in Birmingham. Not even the irony of being jailed for protesting injustice prevented King's continued activism, as he wrote the letter from a jail cell.

Most of "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" relies on a rational appeal to his interlocutors. The bulk of the letter centers on the cautious response his fellow clergymen had to the activism King was practicing. By directly addressing this concern, King makes clear he thinks delaying the protest is tantamount to denying the justice they sought. King's rhetorical moves in this text suggest a hope to persuade those reluctant clergymen of the righteousness of his cause. King himself is responding to the criticism of eight clergymen who called the protest "unwise and untimely" ("Letter" 289). In response, King points to the maxim "justice too long delayed is justice denied" ("Letter" 292). As proof of the injustice he sees, King offers this proverb, which logically links justice to immediate action. And although the white moderates to

which he writes have not yet accepted this connection, King continues to hold out hope that they will. His rhetoric reflects this hope, intertwining an appeal to *logos* with an appeal to *ethos*. While his interlocutors have not yet arrived at King's position regarding the need for immediate action, King consistently employs goodwill in his address to them, especially as he appeals to the common ground they share for wrongs to be corrected. Although King believes the white moderates mistakenly view time as neutral, he leaves room for them to correct this view and rationally appeals to them to do so. This is the culmination of King's theology of human dignity, sin, and justice: that it is possible, and even necessary, to retain hope in and through these difficult conversations.

Yet this hope is not without sorrow. In fact, until that hope is fully consummated, it is understandably tinged with sadness. This image of suffering hope is exemplified by King's rhetoric, especially insofar as he discussed the Church's response to injustice: "In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church" ("Letter" 299-300). In such instances, King amplifies his appeals both to *ethos* and *pathos*. His disappointment has been clearly communicated throughout the previous pages, especially as he directly responds to the clergymen's specific points. His readers know the origins of his disappointment with the church, which he has built up throughout this piece, so when he admits to having wept, this admission has purchase. It is powerfully persuasive. This sincerity gives King's words additional *ethos* appeal, permitting the audience to feel similarly disappointed and letting readers feel the possibility of embracing nihilism. Even King's most dearly beloved institution can fail and disappoint him, yet in that disappointment, he advocates for a revival of the "sacrificial spirit" ("Letter" 300), an ability to give to others without self-concern. This seems to be King's response to temptations of despair. He saw the failure of his time, but King argues that the

Church is capable of making change, so he becomes an advocate rather than a mourner.

Knowing of this capacity is a bulwark against despair, which is the most significant threat to activism.

The other main threat to the nonviolent resistance movement is fear, which King addresses through his appeal to both *logos* and *pathos*. Fear prevents protestors from rejecting the social order as it is, thereby perpetuating the injustice. King says the Church is particularly guilty of this. He claims he “see[s] the church as the body of Christ,” meaning it ought to be perfect, “[b]ut, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists” (“Letter” 300). That “But, oh!” is an *ecphronesis*, an “exclamation expressing emotion” (Lanham 121), which suggests a lack of restraint on King’s part. Readers can sense this emotion, which stems from King’s long perseverance in the struggle. His *logos* appeal underscores why this pain has not led him to stop fighting for justice. While the church, the body of Christ, should be perfect, humanity’s inaction has damaged the body. And yet with Christ as its head, the church will be restored. Disappointment then does not entail despair, but it is no less painful, especially when it can be avoided through active love of one’s neighbor in tangible ways. By expressing his disappointment in an unrestrained way, King ties *pathos* and *logos* together, encouraging readers to feel that same disappointment and fear the continual degeneration of the church.

To further draw out his rational argument here, King explains that the fear that keeps the church from disrupting the status quo in fact hurts the Church. King’s response to this fear in “I See the Promised Land” is rebuke, but an understanding one. He reframes the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke, starting from his own experience with the dangerous Jericho road. He suggests that the men who passed by the hurt man may have feared for their own safety: “the

first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’” (284). Of course, Christ does not positively portray these men or the worldviews they represent. The self-interest implicit in their reactions kept the men from doing good. In contrast, the Good Samaritan is portrayed as good because “he reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” (284). This concern lies at the heart of one of the most basic definitions of *agapé*: loving another without concern for one’s self. *Agapé* is the tool King uses to fight this temptation to despair and to overcome fear, yet failure to actively demonstrate *agapé* stops one from doing good in the world. This is the danger to justice that undergirds King’s disappointment in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.”

King further develops his appeal to *ethos* by acknowledging the strong temptation to lose one’s faith, hope, or love in the face of systemic sins as segregation, poverty, and war. King himself was tempted to give in to despair, a feeling identified by Cornel West as nihilistic, especially in the last years of his life (West 325-29):

By nihilism, I mean to denote a suffocating condition of spiritual blackout that shatters the human capacity to experience love, find meaning, and gain access to hope. Nihilism results from forms of soulcraft that put a premium on conquest and domination, mendacity and criminality. For King, nihilism is the ultimate nightmare—the stark opposite of his dream of the beloved community. (West 326)

King’s inability to conquer the evils of the world provided an opening for nihilism to creep in. As Bernard Lafayette, program coordinator at the SCLC, says in *King in the Wilderness*, “He was disappointed, and he wondered whether or not he could do any more than he had done” (4:15-4:20).

Just as King seemed to teeter on the edge of nihilism, James Earl Ray murdered him. King may have gone the same way as Malcolm X and W. E. B. Du Bois, convinced that some evils are too entrenched to root out. The speech he was set to give on the Sunday following his assassination was entitled “Why America May Go to Hell” (West 328). Despair was apparently a live possibility for King, which makes his hope throughout his life all the more persuasive. He may have given in to the despair, but it seems unlikely that this would have been the ultimate outcome, despite his sermon’s title. His persistence in leaning into his Christian faith in the hope of future redemption could have kept him from that void.

### **Love**

As previously discussed, King affirmed that, if given the choice of era to live in, he would choose his own time. Such a bold statement is explained only by King’s embrace of *agapé* love. Through love, King could see beyond the immediate material conditions and see God’s presence in the world, reshaping creation and inspiring people through love. Because of this love, people were rising up and working for justice, because, as Cornel West writes, “Justice is what love looks like in public” (333). King completes this definition by quoting from the first epistle of John: “Let us love one another, for love is God. And every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love. . . . If we love one another, God dwelleth in us and his love is perfected in us” (“Time” 242). Naturally, the praise of the period for its justice, particularly when viewed through the lens of *agapé*, suggests an appeal to *pathos*. Love is a compelling emotion, and God’s presence in the world helps people love better, and in loving better, people can begin the hard work of reshaping society, building the future King saw as God’s plan. King’s choice to live in this era of the twentieth century,

surprising though it is, allows him to praise the era for its increasing justice, suggesting that it is good because this newfound commitment.

Love is foundational to the work of justice that is required to build the Beloved Community Dr. King sees as the inevitable end of human society. “Without love there would be no justice because love enables the self and the other to exist and provides them with the power required to assert and possess what is properly theirs or to claim for themselves what is unjustly the possession of another” (Williams 21). Part of this required power is love’s ability to “remove tensions, insecurities, and fears” through understanding and good will (“Experiment” 19). King’s entire theological system is built on the belief that love is the center of all being (Williams 21), and his eschatological vision makes this fact most plain through its nomenclature.

The Beloved Community, a society in which all people work for the flourishing of all others, is King’s ideal future (“Experiment” 18), a vision he makes vivid for readers through his appeals to *ethos* and *pathos*. King believes this end is possible to achieve, given that he is working towards it through his activism, protests, and public leadership. Otherwise, his work would be meaningless, but King’s rejection of nihilism and despair is ultimately an embrace of hope, the hope that grounds his whole career. Late in his career King demands that his followers hold to this hope: “Let us hope that this spirit [perfected love] will become the order of the day” (“Time” 242). The passion King has for *agapé* as the first tool for justice is palpable throughout his career, as each of his famous texts include reference to love as necessary for justice.<sup>12</sup>

And King’s hope in love as the first tool of justice was not merely emotional; he lived this passion, using love through nonviolence as the way to improve the nation. His speeches benefited from this sincerity. The use of nonviolent action gave him credibility, which he

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<sup>12</sup> Both the “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” and “The Drum Major Instinct” are explicit about this connection, and “I Have a Dream” and “I See the Promised Land” make the connection through the appeal to brotherhood.

brought into his speeches, giving him an extrinsic *ethos* appeal. When love becomes the spirit of the day, the world will be improved, he truly believed, and his actions gave weight to these assertions. When all people love rightly, societal power is shared. And King believed, spoke, and practiced this truth: “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love” (Franklin 70). This whole spirit of love is meaningless if love is not the final resolution of human existence. King quotes historian and philosopher Arnold Toynbee when he concludes that “the first hope in our inventory [in our pursuit of justice] must be the hope that love is going to have the last word” (“Time” 243). Without a hope in the ultimate finality of love, despair is inevitable, but with it, King claimed, change is not only possible, but inevitable.

### **Hope in God**

King’s Christian faith, which pervaded his entire life, gave his activism and his public texts, an extrinsic *ethos*, an inherent credibility he brought with him into those rhetorical spaces. His background provided both experience and rhetorical fodder out of which he crafted these appeals. His father and grandfather were ministers; he grew up in their church before going to seminary to take up the same calling. When he did become a reverend, his career, though it was in reshaping public attitudes and policies, was built on the belief that he was doing what God had called him to do. To do this job, King joined the biblical prophets in their pursuit of justice, making himself a total servant of the Lord.

He aligns himself with these biblical figures most explicitly in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” when he repudiates the label he had been saddled with as “outside agitator.” There, he says that “[j]ust as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their home towns,” he has come to

Birmingham, implicitly immersing himself in the prophetic tradition (290). King used this immersion to “invoke symbols that were likely to resonate among the white Americans” (Genovese 9), giving himself stronger *ethos* appeal. He understands the authorities that his audience, clergymen, would find compelling. His appeals to that authority integrate his own hope in justice with the work the prophets are doing. Joining that prophetic tradition makes King’s mission clearly defined: “It was the mission of the prophets to proclaim coming restoration and to offer hope” (Fuhr and Yates 15). King, who is doing the work he was called to do by the Lord, proclaims restoration to a righteous world, offering hope to a nation and a people who needed it.

King’s appeal to *ethos* cannot be disentangled from his appeal to *logos*, as both point back to scripture for their ultimate authority. The prophets’ role was not primarily telling of God’s final judgment. Instead, the prophets, particularly the Minor Prophets, told of “the futures of a distant, foreign people, foretelling events that were indeed prophetic for them, but that for us fall into the realm of ancient history. Furthermore, the role of foretelling the future was often secondary to the role of forth-telling; that is, preaching the heart of God to his people” (Fuhr and Yates 19-20). For King, this forth-telling was delivering truths about America’s injustices to an unwilling nation, but also offering the option of repentance and the hope for forgiveness.

For the ancient Israelites, the failure to meet covenant law meant imminent destruction, but the Lord’s faithfulness to his character meant that repentance would mean destruction would be withheld (Fuhr and Yates 21). King’s work within that tradition offered similar hope. Sin separates the world from God, but the new covenant offered by Christ’s resurrection provided hope for eschatological restoration to righteousness (Fuhr and Yates 21). The hope the prophets offered, both the Minor Prophets and King in their tradition, was a hope in the morality of the

universe and the eternity of God (Mikelson 5). Without these two, the hope the prophets offered—and that King drew heavily on himself—has little purchase in the world.

Another element of King's logical appeal to hope is his reliance on God's eternity to ground the work of justice here and now. King and his followers and all people are only on Earth temporarily, and this temporariness tempts people to despair. No one can know for certain if their life's work will continue on after they are gone, and this fact can make the work feel meaningless. What helped King resist despair, and what he encourages in his readers, is a knowledge that his goals are aligned with God's. King makes this explicit in the "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," writing, "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation" (296). If death ceases work, then time becomes an enemy, but if the eternal God is working towards the same goal, then the work for justice will never end until it is complete.

This eschatological vision is founded on the belief that love will win the day (Beem 128), and King views the Holy Spirit as the way God works toward the Beloved Community that he sees as God's purpose for human existence. This faith in the Holy Spirit came early in his career, but it was also a retrospective confession. His hope faltered as he began his first protest, as he wrote, "I've come to the point where I can't face it alone" (qtd. in Capeci 732). In confessing that despair to God, King "received a revelation [of God's presence and love], which enabled him 'to face anything'" (Capeci 732). King's audience may have struggled to see why he was faithful to the cause in his past, especially given the previous confession of doubt in his own abilities. As King acknowledges his struggle, he pivots to his revelation. This transparency establishes an *ethos* based on his credibility and sincerity. He knows withstanding the torment

protestors felt is difficult because he has lived through and experienced that life, yet he carried on because of his dependence on God. Portraying this *ethos* enabled his audience to make that commitment to the cause. King may have felt the Holy Spirit pass over him, providing comfort to him so that he was enabled to carry out his work well. King became a coworker of God in that moment and continued through the rest of his life.

Because King's values are rightly ordered, he claims that he has seen the inevitable end of the journey humanity is on. "He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land" (286). Sensing that the threats against his life might be real, he does add a caveat: "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land" (286). The conviction with which King makes this claim is fundamentally founded in a firm belief in the power of God to redeem the world for good, a work which began with the Cross. According to King, "The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over all the forces that seek to block community" ("Experiment" 20). The move King makes here reframes the crucifixion and resurrection in his terms, logically aligning the nonviolent resistance movement's work to restore community with God's work of universal redemption. God entered into the world and began to reshape it, working to make it whole once more, and like him, the nonviolent resistance movement was working towards similar ends, King suggests.

The Cross is a revolutionary moment, and King, as a believer in the eternal power of the Cross as a redefining event in history, recognizes this fact. The Cross offers King a binary choice, according to Cornel West:

The untenanted Cross. . . leads to either the perennial death of God or the resurrection of Christ, either the chronic crushing of truth and love or the feeble yet discernible evidences of truth and love generated by an Easter joy. The revolutionary Christian-like King lives in the dark shadows and bleak realities of lies and crimes with weak evidences of truth and love. (335)

King himself may disagree with West's characterization of the evidence as "feeble" and "weak," but the binary choice between believing either that love will be eternally extinguished by men or that love can reshape the world is at the center of the dilemma of hope. The answer is obvious for King: "King equated love with the form of being in the cosmos. Being is love" (Williams 25).

The Cross is God's love working in the world; King's credibility as both a reverend and an activist for justice establish an *ethos* for this belief. King brings this *ethos* with him into each text he offers. He has suffered jail and stabbings, yet he worked and advocated for love and justice. That credibility compels the audience to accept his faith. King knows that God is working in the world and will eventually bring the world into His promised vision. This vision that King shares allows him enough room to hope, letting him fear no man (286). The storytelling King has employed to this point in the narrative, particularly the repetition of what he would have missed had he died, creates a *pathos* appeal. Working alongside God provided King with the hope necessary to continue fighting for justice in this life, though only for a brief period.

### **Conclusion**

One can believe in the inherent dignity of the human person, as King did. One can believe that the human person is existentially separated from God by sin, as King did. One can work diligently for justice in order to restore community between people and God, as King did. This system does not guarantee success. In fact, sin's hold over existence is part of the current

human condition and makes people work against their self-interest because they want to hurt another person or help themselves more. This problem is nearly intractable without God's intervention, and though people can work towards justice, universal redemption is not possible on merely human terms. Knowing this fact threatens the work of justice people are doing, suggesting it may be meaningless. This possibility encourages despair, fear, and ultimately nihilism. The only remedy King offers is hope, a hope founded on faith in God's redemption of the cosmos, inaugurated with the crucifixion and resurrection and active in the lives of those committed to his kingdom. King held onto this hope, though he was tempted to despair throughout his life. In his last speech, he gave himself over to hope and was satisfied in the promise that, though he might not get to his Beloved Community with his fellow people, the world will be made right inevitably through God's work that began with the resurrection of Christ and has not yet finished. One day, the world will be made right. We just have to wait, but while we're waiting, King suggests we serve God's work for justice in the ways we can.

## Conclusion: Word Made Flesh

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1.14)*

Dr. Martin Luther King's theological rhetoric was embodied in his life and his work. The public career that lasted over ten years aimed at ending three major injustices: racism, or at least segregation; economic exploitation of the poor; and militarism, specifically represented in his time by the Vietnam War. His advocacy against these, though particularly the latter two, caused his popularity to plummet in his lifetime. When he died, only about a third of the country had a high opinion of him, yet today, he has the approval of over 90% of Americans (Jones). Naturally, time has shifted the context in which the polling occurs, and it has removed some of the edges of his philosophy in the public eye, but arguably King's present popularity is primarily due to his ability to marry persuasive rhetoric with strong theological foundations, and in so doing, he shifted public opinion on these crucial issues.

King's rhetorical ability is well-documented, and his theology is readily apparent. Tying the two together gives us a fuller picture of the undergirding logic of his activism. King's Christian worldview pervaded his career. He believed that God was a loving being and the ultimate source of reality, a belief he affirmed when he adopted personalism as his most basic philosophical position. This belief served as his foundational fact from which the rest of his worldview arose. King believed that God created people, and that He loves every person, giving every person dignity as a created being. He also believed that God's love for people was unmotivated and creative. He then exhorted his followers to hold that same love, *agapé*, for even

their neighbors who hate them. Despite God's unmotivated, infinite love, King recognized a distance between humanity and God; this he attributed to sin, the evil that separated humanity from God beyond the inherent distinctions natural to our existentially separate identities.

For King, this separation was not the conclusion of humanity's relationship with God. He also believed that the separation sin caused was not permanent. Instead, he believed that people could be brought into a state of righteousness through the work of justice. Human action could reduce the injustices in the world, improving existence, but King also felt that justice was only enacted through *agapé*. Otherwise, those actions would be warped, turning into injustice. Loving even those who hate you is an impossible task without supernatural aid. King believed that God was working in the world through and with people to create the justice that would redeem the world. Though he believed this, he did not live to see it happen; instead, he hoped that one day justice would be the way of the world, and he knew this would happen through God's intervention. This system, which rested on the foundation that God is a loving being who desires relationships with his created beings but is resisted by sin, is a sufficient cause for King's activism. He communicated these convictions powerfully through his masterful rhetorical appeals, drawing on all the means of persuasion that Aristotle describes in the *Rhetoric*.

In "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," he expresses his deep value of the human person through pathetic appeals, communicating the necessity of respecting human dignity by displaying evil's effects on the human person. King treats sin far more logically, using Tillich's definition of sin as separation as a foundation for his explanation of what sin, particularly those three sinful actions, does to the human family. He brings his own extrinsic *ethos* to his appeals for justice, interweaving it with intrinsic appeals to show his own credibility and values to convince his audience that they are on the same side, fighting for justice. Hope that redemption is

possible and inevitable undergirds each of these previous three claims, and naturally King uses all three primary rhetorical appeals to communicate that belief. King's rhetoric expresses his theological system, and through his demonstrations and personal sacrifice in his pursuit of justice, he embodied it, giving credibility and weight to what may have otherwise been a superficial claim.

This embodied pursuit of justice toward a transcendent end gave King the *kairos* necessary to persuade what Taylor called a Secular<sub>3</sub> society. After public spaces in American became ostensibly free from religion, religion's function as a meaning-affirming aspect of life began to wane. People tried to answer the existential questions of life through other means, giving thin reasoning for the inherent value of this world. Men like Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X, with their materialist worldview, worked for racial justice, just as King did, yet neither has garnered the same public support King has. Religious institutions like the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century church similarly failed to create the same meaningful connection, but for the opposite reason. Instead of giving inordinate attention to the immanent, churches sought to focus on the transcendent and keep the peace on Earth through moderation, angering both those who supported integration and those opposed. Both the materialist and many parts of the mid-century American church undervalued some aspect of the human person. King did not. Instead, he spoke to the holistic needs of people, integrating the immanent within the transcendent and valuing both the physical and spiritual needs of a nation that needed it.

This project is by no means a comprehensive documentation of King's theology and rhetoric. It has necessarily focused on only a few of King's public writings. King's career spanned more than a decade; during that time, he was a prolific writer and orator, and each address and text is rich in theological rhetoric. Additional research into other texts may provide

interesting nuances in his theology and rhetoric. It is also necessary to say that this project was primarily concerned with the theology King expressed rather than the theology he actually held. It is concerned with what he said he believed because he used that stated theology as a foundation for his rhetoric; what theology he held beyond that which he stated publically, perhaps described in private writings or through interviews with friends of family, may provide valuable insights as well. These insights may allow for a deeper appreciation of who King was as a person and activist.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was by no means a perfect person. He had sins he struggled with just as everyone does, but he was not limited by his sins to support the status quo. He felt that he was called by God to enact justice, and like “the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their home towns” (“Letter” 290), he went into unfriendly territories to challenge the forces of evil. King was in the prophetic tradition, defying sin and injustice to create a better world. He believed he was a co-worker with God; through his life, His work was being done. Though his theology is liberal and therefore worth scrutinizing, its foundations were as traditionally Christian as possible. In fact, they are a microcosm of the gospel’s message: humanity is loved by God; sin has tainted that relationship; that relationship can be saved through effecting justice, and not only can it be saved, it is a certainty that one day we will be redeemed for good. We just have not gotten to the Promised Land yet. King knew that, and this gave him the ability to do the necessary work he was called to.

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