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“Moderate” Resistance in *A Call for Unity*:

A Historical Perspective on Martin Luther King Jr.’s Prison Epistle

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Dr. Angela Cooley

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Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal,” but history shows that for some, equality has been stolen without cause. African Americans in the United States were bought and sold as chattel, stripped of personal dignity or legal rights and forced to remain on the bottom of the societal ladder. It would have been understandable for such an oppressed race to lose hope over the course of centuries. However, a great many held fast through the horrors of slavery and the injustice of Jim Crow by clinging to a shared faith in the divine. When the Civil Rights Movement began in the mid-twentieth century, it should come as no surprise that it was led predominantly by black religious leaders. The Civil Rights Movement was a movement preached from the pulpit, and it likewise received some of its harshest criticism from white ministers. What these ministers represented was a dangerous apathy that threatened the progress of civil rights and inspired some of Martin Luther King Jr.’s most memorable words.

While leading a demonstration, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested on April 12, 1963 in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. King marched knowing that his arrest was probable, but he did not consider such an imprisonment to be a dishonor. Nor did his week and a half long jail stay prove insignificant, as it brought national attention to his efforts.<sup>1</sup> Dr. King also realized that his imprisonment offered an opportunity to finally address his critics. It had once been suggested to King that he write an open letter from jail, as many important Christian figures had done, but until now, circumstances had not allowed it.<sup>2</sup> In what would come to be known as the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. King chose to call out Birmingham’s Christian

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1. Foster Hailey, "Dr. King Arrested at Birmingham," *New York Times*: April 13, 1963, available at <http://ezproxy.mnsu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/116511509?accountid=12259>.

2. S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 117.

leadership, a proxy for whites everywhere, for standing in the way of civil rights. His prison epistle arose from the sense that, more than the segregationists, it might be the moderates and neutral parties that could put an end to the movement.

On the day following Dr. King's arrest, a letter signed by eight local religious leaders, both Christian and Jewish, appeared in the *Birmingham News*, calling for an end to the civil rights demonstrations in the city.<sup>3</sup> This letter has since come to be known as *A Call for Unity*. The authors wrote that such demonstrations, as "led in part by outsiders," were both "unwise and untimely." They recognized that a racial problem existed, but they did not believe "extreme measures," meaning extrajudicial measures, were needed to solve the problem.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the authors appeared to be calling for peace, supporting neither the demonstrators nor the segregationists. This letter became the immediate inspiration for the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, and Dr. King addressed his missive to the authors of *A Call for Unity*.

In order to understand the significance of Dr. King's letter, one must first explore where *A Call for Unity's* moderate perspective comes from. As noted above, the letter was written by eight of the top religious leaders in Birmingham, including bishops from the Episcopal, Methodist, and Catholic traditions, Presbyterian and Baptist ministers, and a Jewish Rabbi. Further, all eight of the authors had collaborated on another letter in January of 1963, called *An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense*, written in response to Governor Wallace's

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3. Birmingham News, "White Clergymen Urge Local Negroes To Withdraw from Demonstrations," *Birmingham News* (Birmingham, AL): April 13, 1963, Microform.

4. Ibid.

“segregation forever” speech.<sup>5</sup> This earlier letter is of particular note because it sets up the themes that they would reiterate in April’s *A Call for Unity*. The authors wrote that disagreement is not a cause for “advocating defiance, anarchy and subversion,” and they said that while laws can be tested and changed, they must not be ignored.<sup>6</sup> This focus on law and order, while directed against both segregationists and integrationists, firmly challenged the non-violent approach taken by the Civil Rights Movement.

Moderates were most likely to adopt a focus on law and order because it sounds reasonable to a concerned public. When the Birmingham Movement started in April, there was a renewed expression of support for a negotiated settlement, albeit on the city’s time and terms. On April 4, the day after King and his colleagues arrived in the city, the new mayor-elect Albert Boutwell issued a lengthy statement in the *Birmingham News* about “outside agitators,” stating that the city’s residents could “work out their problems peacefully” on their own. He ended by saying that the people of Birmingham “have a deep and abiding respect for law and order and for their fellow man.”<sup>7</sup> The implication being that Dr. King’s organization promotes lawlessness. The mayor wanted to send the message that they could have reached a compromise if King had not riled up the black population. Of course, African Americans did not want a compromise, but the full expression of rights due to any citizen. Holding the office of mayor meant touting the position that would put the public most at ease, and thus to leave the moral question of civil

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5. Birmingham Post-Herald, “Religious Leaders Stand Against Court Defiance,” *Birmingham Post-Herald* (Birmingham, AL): January 19, 1963, Charles Colcock Jones Carpenter Papers, 1920-1969, AR241, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

6. Ibid.

7. James Spotwood, “Boutwell Warns ‘Outside Agitators,’” *Birmingham News* (Birmingham, AL): April 4, 1963, Microform.

rights unanswered. It meant promoting the same moderate perspective that the city's religious leaders had been expressing for years: maintain law and order.

One of *A Call for Unity's* authors, Episcopal Bishop Charles Carpenter, provides a case study for the way a moderate religious leader would have used his influence. Bishop Carpenter had long been a supporter of a law and order approach to civil rights, and he exemplified the law and order moderate. He publicly expressed his opinions during each of the major civil rights campaigns of the early 1960s. For example, he had written to the National Council of Churches in 1960 concerning the sit-in movement, criticizing civil disobedience as "just another name for lawlessness." He claimed that permitting it would only lead to worse lawlessness.<sup>8</sup> Later, he would do everything in his power to keep Episcopal leaders out of the march from Selma to Montgomery, citing Episcopal policy and diocesan etiquette.<sup>9</sup> Carpenter's position granted him a wide audience, and in collaboration with the other authors of *A Call for Unity*, his moderate message could reach the whole city.

Moderation was not without criticism, even before King wrote from his Birmingham jail cell. The year after Bishop Carpenter issued his 1960 statement on civil-disobedience, he was criticized by his ministerial colleagues in the north for being too lenient of the attacks on the Freedom Riders. Rev. Joel Williams of Connecticut argued that law and order in Alabama existed "for oppression and not for justice," that advocating strict law and order was to support

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8. Charles Carpenter, Letter to the National Council of Churches, April 7, 1960, quoted in S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail,"* Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2001.

9. Charles Carpenter, Letter to Rev. Almon R. Pepper, March 25, 1965, Charles Colcock Jones Carpenter Papers, 1920-1969, AR241, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

that oppression.<sup>10</sup> Another colleague, the Rev. John Morris of the National Council of Churches, called Carpenter the “chaplain to the dying order of the Confederacy.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, criticism also came from the segregationist side as well. According to one unnamed segregationist, Carpenter was a “traitor of Alabama” for not doing more to stop the Freedom Riders, and that he should have received the same treatment as those caught in the attack.<sup>12</sup> Such a moderate position serves to alienate people on both sides of the spectrum, making a call for compromise even harder to achieve. Moreover, it gives people an excuse to claim neutrality, no matter how harmful neutrality in justice might be.

Criticism of law and order was not only directed against Bishop Carpenter or his colleagues. On April 11<sup>th</sup>, two days before *A Call for Unity* was published, another group of ministers issued a statement responding to the calls for law and order by reminding people that assembly and free speech are guaranteed rights under the constitution.<sup>13</sup> The authors of this statement were, in their own words, “an interracial group of Christian ministers speaking as individuals.”<sup>14</sup> These men were not pleased with the racial situation in Birmingham, and they shared the moderate hope for communication between the city and its African American leadership. But, they also affirmed the right of the people to protest for their freedom. Given that this was not directed at any one individual or statement, but against the general climate in

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10. Joel Williams, Letter to Bishop Charles Carpenter, May 15, 1961, Charles Colcock Jones Carpenter Papers, 1920-1969, AR241, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

11. Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers*, 35.

12. Unsigned, Telegram to Bishop Charles Carpenter, May 30, 1961, Charles Colcock Jones Carpenter Papers, 1920-1969, AR241, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

13. Birmingham World, “Nine Ministers ask Civic Communication in Petition,” *Birmingham World* (Birmingham, AL): April 17, 1963, Microform.

14. Ibid.

Birmingham, it becomes clear that the authors of *A Call for Unity* were giving voice to a widespread public opinion, an epidemic that threatened civil rights.

In neither promoting segregation nor the civil rights demonstrations, moderates washed their hands of the whole situation. This apathy became the centerpiece of King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. King wrote that the moderate's "lukewarm acceptance [was] much more bewildering than outright rejection" He claimed that they preferred a negative type of peace, an "absence of tension" as opposed to the "presence of justice" in true peace.<sup>15</sup> Anything else would have forced people to take sides and alienate themselves from friends and family and neighbors. King simply argued that moderates favored ignoring injustice so that they did not have to deal with it. In hiding behind law and order, true justice becomes irrelevant since the law is considered absolute.

In addressing the authors of *A Call for Unity*, Dr. King brought his authority as a minister and theologian to bear against the equally strong authority of his white colleagues. King turned the question of law and order into a moral one. Since moderates were unwilling to wrestle with the distinction between just and unjust laws, he did it for them. King clearly elucidates that an unjust law is one "that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself." He wrote that "this is difference made legal."<sup>16</sup> King argued that while his colleagues were right about obeying the law, it was only beneficial if the law was just, as an unjust law does more harm than good.<sup>17</sup> What the authors of *A Call for Unity* could not understand, or would not admit, was that

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15. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," Philadelphia, PA: American Friends Service Committee, May 1, 1963, available at <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-birmingham-city-jail-0>, 8.

16. *Ibid*, 7.

17. *Ibid*, 6.



the law would never side with African Americans. The unjust laws were upheld by an equally corrupt administration and justice system. King's letter countered the assumption that the law was absolute and just.

Unfortunately, despite the eloquence of King's letter, there is little evidence to suggest that it changed many minds, at least not for among authors of *A Call for Unity*. Following the Birmingham campaign, Bishop Carpenter went on to oppose the March from Selma to Montgomery, referring to it as a source of confusion and disturbance.<sup>18</sup> In an oral history interview conducted in 1989, Methodist Bishop Paul Hardin, another of *A Call for Unity* reflected upon being targeted by King as unprogressive. While he misremembered some of the details, it is clear that he resented having his name attached to King's letter, especially since he felt that their earlier letter, *An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense*, rejected the notion of segregation.<sup>19</sup> There is little indication that they grasped the message that King was trying to send. Although, in 1972, another of the authors, Catholic Bishop Joseph Durick, would quote Dr. King quite favorably on the subject of ecumenical unity as a necessity for peace on earth.<sup>20</sup> Whether or not this is indicative of support for the late Dr. King's methods, or if it is simply an ironic anecdote remains up for debate.

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18. Joel Williams, Letter to Bishop Charles Carpenter, May 15, 1961, Charles Colcock Jones Carpenter Papers, 1920-1969, AR241, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

19. Paul Hardin Jr., Oral History Interview by Donald Matthews, December 8, 1989, Interview C-0071, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) in the Southern Oral History Program Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/C-0071/excerpts/excerpt\\_2242.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/C-0071/excerpts/excerpt_2242.html).

20. Joseph A. Durick, "A Round Table: Where Are We In Ecumenism?: Joseph Durick," In *America* 126, 3 (January 22, 1972), 51.

Regardless of whether or not the authors of *A Call for Unity* learned anything from Dr. King's letter, it is important to note that they were never the whole of his audience. Responding to a specific statement and a specific group of clergy merely gave his letter more force. Bishop Hardin put it this way: "It wouldn't have much influence if he'd addressed it to a backwoods Baptist church."<sup>21</sup> Given the response that the authors received after King's letter was released, the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* did have an impact, if at the expense of the eight clergy it was addressed to. For example, a letter written to Bishop Carpenter, and cc'd to Dr. King, praised SCLC for its work in Birmingham. The author urged Carpenter to support King's work, but she did not sound particularly hopeful on account of King's letter. Rather, the letter allowed the author, Annette Johnson, to reflect on the role of the church in the Civil Rights Movement and conclude that it was acting contradictory to its principles.<sup>22</sup> If others, like Annette, gave King's letter equal thought, then it had at least some success. Unfortunately, that success was primarily limited to the northern states, as the Movement continued to struggle in the south for the next five years until King's death.

Ultimately, the *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* stands as the touchstone document of the Civil Rights Movement. It encapsulated the core principles of non-violence and explored why waiting for a more opportune time to protest was impossible. Undoubtedly, Martin Luther King Jr. would have communicated his point with or without the boost that *A Call for Unity* gave him, but there is no telling if it would have had so significant an impact. By using his letter to combat the moderate position explicated by his white colleagues, King masterfully argued against mass

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21. Hardin, Oral History Interview.

22. Annette P. Johnson, Letter to Bishop Charles Carpenter, May 14, 1963, available at <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-annette-p-johnson-reverend-charles-c-carpenter>.

apathy. He wrote that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”<sup>23</sup> Moderation, as shown in this essay, indirectly supported segregation, and it did nothing to stop it. As John F. Kennedy once quoted of Edmund Burke, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”<sup>24</sup> This is why King wrote his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, to call everyone to just action, to prevent the triumph of evil.

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23. King, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” 3.

24. John F Kennedy, "John F. Kennedy: Address Before the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa. - May 17, 1961," The American Presidency Project, Accessed April 25, 2018, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8136>.

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