Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter From a Birmingham Jail”

5 Main Charges
1. Outsider
2. Causing violence/trouble
3. Untimely (better to wait)
4. Civil disobedience is wrong
5. Extremism

Responses to Charges

1. Outsider
a. invited by Birmingham affiliate of Southern Christian Leadership Conference to engage in nonviolent direct action; organizational ties--King = president of SCLC (428)
b. interrelatedness of all humans/communities; injustice anywhere = threat to justice everywhere
Q: If one accepts King's criteria, then what are the limits on intervention in affairs of other communities?
Superman?
Diagram of Spider Web of mutuality--touch one part of web influence the rest

2. Causing violence/trouble
a. need to look at the underlying causes of injustice and violence (revised Good Samaritan; Dom Helder Camera); racial injustice does violence to people. Threat of violent force keeps unjust structures in place; distorts personality. Child: Why can't I go to Funtown?
b. White power structure leaves the African American Community with no alternative. We have exhausted all reasonable and viable alternatives: 1. collected facts on desegregation, 2. Negotiated with the leaders (Merchants) and they refused to talk in good faith; 3. Self-purification--prepared for nonviolence; 4. Direct action--demonstrations to raise consciousness of injustice to local and national communities.
Q: Does MLK concede that he is causing violence/trouble?
c. Nonviolent direct action does not create tension. It merely brings existing, but hidden tension/violence created by injustice out into the open. It exposes injustice and the violence needed to support what is not true. It seeks to force community to confront injustice, create dialogue for negotiation, growth, and reform (instead of monologue). King’s demonstrations exposed the underlying violence to African Americans. For example, the fact that segregation distorts the oppressor and the oppressed (the young girl who can’t go to Funtown comes to see herself as inferior or comes to hate her oppressors.
d. If pursuit of truth and justice "causes" violence, responsibility lies with those who support the underlying injustice. It is wrong to refrain from gaining basic rights due to fear of violence. Jesus' witness to truth led to violence on the cross.

3. Untimely
a. Time is neutral. It can be used destructively or constructively. PROGRESS IS NOT INEVITABLE. Progress depends upon human effort cooperating with God; making
God's reign a reality in their lives. Silence of good people in the face of injustice = a sin; can be more insidious than open hatred.

b. Rhetorical Stmt: Time is always ripe to do right.

c. Time doesn't stand still. Maintaining status quo can make it harder to change it in the future.

d. Privileged seldom give up privileges voluntarily; Oppressors and oppressed must be prodded. Oppressed must seize the initiative by refusing to cooperate with injustice.

e. We have waited too long already. Justice too long delayed = justice denied. Injustice is doing more and more damage to people. Cut losses

4. Civil Disobedience is wrong.

2 types of laws: just v. unjust
Just laws--duty to obey
Unjust laws = no law at all; positive duty to disobey in a just manner

Criteria for distinguishing just vs. unjust

A. natural (moral) law--human reason; nature of reality
B. divine law--positive decrees of God; revealed; ex 10 Commandments
C. Eternal law--mind of God
D. Does it uplift or degrade human personality; false superiority of segregation; respect for human dignity; allow person to flourish, use all gifts to their fullest?
E. Does majority compel minority to obey a law it doesn't follow itself?
F. Participation in making of the law by all affected?
G. Unjust application--applied unequally to favor some
H. Highest respect for "law" = break an unjust law a) openly b) lovingly in order to raise public awareness and c) willingly accepting penalty
I. Historical precedents--Jesus, Socrates, American Colonists, Hitler acted legally

“The means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek” (435). “It is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends” (435). Civil disobedience of unjust law is NOT an immoral means. Rather, it is a moral duty. The use of violence is an immoral means and is not justified by a good end.

5. Extremist
It is good to be an extremist for the justice if nonviolent. For example, JESUS Malcom X; temperance--properly channeled action

3 Counter charges (or criticisms that King initiates)

1. White moderates = the greatest obstacle to racial injustice—not the KKK.
   a) Supposed “neutrality” = cowardly support for the status quo. It is worse than open oppression in the sense that it hides itself. Inaction = de facto support of segregation. Because we are all interrelated, there is no neutral ground or place to stand where you do not affect the controversy. Segregation could not continue without the consent of the white
moderates. If the white moderates say no to segregation, it would not survive.

b) White moderates have the power to change things. By placing unjust “law and order” above racial justice, they use their power unjustly.

c) White moderates dismissal of African American moderates will push African Americans toward Black Nationalism and extremism.

2. **White churches worship a false God.** “Who is their God?” (p. 434) How can they say that the Gospel has “no real concern” for “social and economic issues?” They are reading (and distorting) the Gospel through the lens of *individualism*. Christian churches need to be true to their story (and tradition): stir up society for justice as did the prophets (including the prophet Jesus) and the early Christian churches.

3. **Police brutality.** The police respond to nonviolent direct action with brutality. Implicit argument: truth does not need violence to make itself true.

Film Resources
"Martin Luther King, Jr., Civil Rights Leader." Black Americans of Achievement Video Collections (12 volumes, this should be vol. 4). 1992 by Schlessinger Video Productions, a division of the Library Video Company, PO Box 1110, Bala Cynwyd, PA 19004 SD library call no. VC B King Martin

PBS series: The work of Taylor Branch on MLK