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AP Language

“Letter from Birmingham Jail” OPR

Martin Luther King Jr.’s profound letter discussing public concerns and anti-segregation captioned *Letter from Birmingham Jail* postulates a resonant response to statements by Alabama clergymen opposing the civil rights initiatives in Birmingham, Alabama. During the mid-20th century, Dr. King was an inspiring forerunner of the civil rights movement, having the privilege of serving as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as well as an avid proponent of the remonstrations of the African-American community, from freedom rides to sit-ins. Through the exemplary use of all three rhetorical appeals, including logos, ethos, and pathos, King manages to present a multitude of reasons explicating why segregation is both morally and historically unjust and undemocratic. In addition, King provides references to several significant historical events, people, and ideologies supporting his argument with precedents to the concepts of human equality, morality, civil disobedience, freedom, dissemination, and faith. As a result, he connects these concepts to the context of the civil rights movement and demonstrates the immorality of African Americans to be ostracized as they were since their predecessors always preached against the notion of discrimination and unlawful social doctrines in democracy.

Primarily, King’s most effective rhetorical appeals are logos, ethos, and pathos. By the use of examples and historical evidence across the body of his letter, his audience can better relate to King and empathize with his viewpoints more openly. King demonstrated effective logos in the third paragraph, “Just as the eighth century prophets left their little villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Greco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown” (King, pg. 1). In consideration of King’s target audience, King appeals to the audience’s familiarity with religious figures and their significance. Since Dr. King was indelibly devoted to Christian organizations and the church, it can be inferred that the audience shares a passionate religious fervor based on their positions, which is a strong persuasive appeal. Similarly, since King remained in prison for a considerable time, he employs pathos to evoke sympathy for his plight. For instance, “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed...For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never...’ We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied’” (King, pg. 2). King appeals to African Americans as a unified group, because in the first part of the quote, he equates them with the ‘oppressed’ that have been vehemently ridiculed and violated throughout African-American history, dating back to the notoriety of slavery. At the same time, ethos and pathos were evident when the five-year old boy asked his father, “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?” (King, pg. 2) It shows how racism and hatred towards a specific minority isn’t naturally instinctive, but rather cultivated and instructed, and how the brutalities of discrimination pathetically reflect an individual’s ethos from childhood and last for a long period of time. Finally, it is important to note that besides the letter’s extensive length, Dr. King spent a great deal of his time in prison contemplating the civil rights movement and the injustices of the white moderate Alabama clergymen criticizing African Americans, revealing that the length of a piece of writing is not the primary focus while constructing essays, because according to Aristotle’s rhetorical theory, “rhetoric is the counterpart to dialect.” (Aristotle, 385-320 BC)