

# A letter from a Conway house

I recently heard a recording of Martin Luther King, Jr. reading his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” which he wrote while serving a five-day sentence for his part in organizing peaceful protests. He wrote the letter to the White clergy, who objected to his peaceful protests. King called these clergy out for caring more about law and order than for justice. King argued that people have a moral duty to obey just laws and a moral duty to disobey unjust laws. King gave several ways to identify unjust laws; here are two – unjust laws degrade humans, and they make minorities follow rules that do not apply to the majority.

King listed many of the unjust laws in Birmingham, which he called the most segregated city in America. In it, Blacks were often unable to register to vote, so they could not have a say on how the laws were written, which allowed unjust laws to be enacted. With these unjust laws in place, Blacks faced unfair treatment in the courts, a shocking number of unsolved bombings of their homes, a hostile police force and humiliating signs that prevented Blacks access to facilities available to Whites. Given these atrocities, King expressed his disappointment with the White clergy, who claimed to share his goals but were unwilling to support any direct action to make things better. King contrasted this complacency

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to spread the Christian message. King argued that these heroes were not complacent, and the Church of his day would become irrelevant if it remained complacent.

King’s words are stirring. Many White readers today, no doubt, hear or read his words and convince themselves that they would have supported direct action to end injustice against Blacks. I put myself in this group, but I must admit that I have trouble drawing lessons from King’s inspiring letter. If you agree with the argument I made in a previous column – that things are getting better over time – you may, like me, have trouble finding the clear-cut injustices to oppose.

For instance, diversity is a noble goal and, of course, our society should accept people of all backgrounds. It is clear that trans people should face the same job opportunities as the rest of us. But should they be allowed to compete in women’s sports? That is a much harder issue to support. It puts biological women at a disadvantage

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with the willingness to act exhibited by the early Christians, who agitated enough for change that they were often persecuted, and he also contrasted this complacency with the willingness of Paul to travel widely

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In inner cities, minorities face poverty and poor educational outcomes, which may be the most important civil rights issue of our day. But how can we help bring about positive change in the inner city? Supporting more money for education will not work. We have tried that.

I believe the moral issues of our day require us to give more thought to how we should support change than the moral issues of several decades ago did. While this is a testament to our progress, it also presents a challenge. We must carefully evaluate whether proposed changes actually improve unjust conditions. Luckily, states are laboratories for new public policies. States try out new solutions. For instance, many states have adopted voucher programs and established many charter schools to help improve K-12 education. Scholars need to make sure the results of these programs are analyzed to correctly evaluate whether they work. Scholars also need to disseminate this information to the general public. With this knowledge, people will have an easier time knowing what positions to take on the challenging moral issues of our day.

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