

# Selma 1965



## Thoughts on 'The Letter'

by Dick Bogle

The man was spiritual, logical, philosophical and one of the bravest men to walk the face of the earth.

In one of the most eloquent statements written during our time, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," all these facets of the man we all loved, Dr. Martin Luther King, show forth in sound literary brilliance.

He wrote the epistle, while jailed during the Birmingham demonstrations, in response to eight leading white Birmingham churchmen who had urged the city's Blacks to withdraw their support from the protest.

Point by point he destroyed the arguments of the eight men and at the same time illustrated his own philosophy and depth of spirituality.

They called him an extremist. That he was a spiritual man was evidenced by this reply.

"But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you.' Was not Amos an extremist for justice: 'Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.' So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love?"

His spirituality was further demonstrated by how he criticized the church as an archdefender of the status quo.

"But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointments with the church have turned into outright disgust. Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world."

The man's logic was profound. Again from the letter a response to a criticism.

"You may well ask: Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path? You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Non-

violent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue."

"My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals."

Dr. King was often criticized by the white establishment because he "broke" the law. His reply to this frequent criticism indicates one of the cornerstones of his activist philosophy.

"You often express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to

break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us to consciously break laws. One may well ask: 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others? The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws; just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that 'an unjust law is no law at all'. Now what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is

unjust. All 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."

I never had the opportunity to meet Dr. King in person but there was one occasion when I felt very close to him. His lovely wife Coretta came to Portland for a singing concert in the mid-sixties. At the time I was assigned as her bodyguard. For nearly two days, the only time she was out of my sight was when she was sleeping. Then the afternoon she was to leave, her husband called and she asked if I would like to speak to him. Would I! He thanked me for protecting what was near and dear to him and I thanked him for all he had done for all of us. I'll never forget that moment and history will never forget Dr. Martin Luther King.

*In recognition of a man who gave his life  
trying to further the dream of equality,  
Pepsi Cola Bottling Company of Portland  
salutes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*



2505 N.E. Pacific  
Portland, Oregon  
238-7000