

*Remembering Birmingham:
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s
Letter to America—50 Years
Later*

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The Story Behind the “Letter from Birmingham”

It all happened fifty years ago in Birmingham, a place described by King as “the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States.” A city where the libraries were not only segregated, but books containing photographs of black rabbits and white rabbits together in the same space were banned from their shelves. A city where, according to one famous report, “every medium of mutual interest, every reasoned approach, every inch of middle ground has been fragmented by the emotional dynamite of racism.” A city where bullets, bombs and burning crosses served as constant deterrents to blacks who aspired to anything greater than their assigned station of disparity. A city where vigilante mobs in white hoods collaborated with the police to reinforce the social status quo. There, in April 1963, King and his movement of nonviolent protesters staged a campaign that would transform America.

The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, a wiry and fiery Baptist preacher, had earned a reputation as the city’s most fearless and outspoken fighter for human rights. It was Shuttlesworth who beseeched King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference deputies to descend on Birmingham and help the city’s black community confront segregation “with our bodies and souls.” He told them, “Birmingham is where it’s at, gentlemen. I assure you, if you come to Birmingham, we will not only gain prestige but really shake the country.” Shuttlesworth believed that “as Birmingham goes, so goes the nation.” And Dr. King agreed.

On April 12, 1963, King was arrested for demonstrating on the streets of Birmingham. The next day, while locked up, he spotted this headline on page two of the *Birmingham News*: “WHITE CLERGYMEN URGE LOCAL NEGROES TO WITHDRAW FROM DEMONSTRATIONS.” Below it was a joint op-ed from a group of prominent, socially moderate Birmingham ministers. The group—comprised of six Protestant ministers, a Catholic bishop and a Jewish rabbi—was supportive of civil rights for Negroes but critical of Dr. King’s “extreme” protest methods which the clergymen felt would lead to civil unrest and unnecessary violence. In their public statement, they alluded to King as an “outsider” and criticized the movement for “unwise and untimely” demonstrations. “When rights are consistently denied,” they wrote, “a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets.”

And that prompted a letter of response from Dr. King.

-Chapter 1, “As Birmingham Goes”



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Commemorating 50th Anniversary of King's "Letter from Birmingham"

This year, 2013, marks the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" and "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Why did you choose to focus on King's letter?

Edward Gilbreath: Understandably, most people will point to Dr. King's brilliant "I Have a Dream" speech as his definitive message. It's obviously his most-repeated national moment. But I would argue that his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" stands as an equally extraordinary moment in time, capturing King at his most courageous – and at his most human. Just like Martin Luther's *95 Theses* nailed to the Wittenberg church door, King's jailhouse manifesto is a document teeming with deep and challenging ideas about truth, justice and faith. His freestyle meditation addresses the events taking place in Birmingham and the Deep South of 1963, but it also has relevance for the post-Christian, post-racial, Red State/Blue State cacophony of twentieth-first century America. More than any other writing or speech by King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" captures the spiritual and social essence of the man and his mission. In it, you can see all the theological, philosophical and political ideas and principles that shaped King's Christian vision. And my feeling is that they are ideas and principles that we'd do well to reclaim today.

What was significant about Birmingham as a stage for the civil rights movement?

Edward: In 1963 Birmingham, Alabama, was one of the most notorious strongholds of segregation and white supremacy in the South. It was a place described by King as "the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States." Not only were the public institutions, such as libraries, segregated but it was so severe that even books that contained photos of black rabbits and white rabbits together were banned from the library shelves. It was a city where bullets, bombs and burning crosses served as constant deterrents to blacks who aspired to anything greater than their assigned station of inequality. There, in April 1963, King and his movement of nonviolent protesters staged a campaign that would transform America. The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, a fiery Baptist preacher in Birmingham, had implored King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference associates to come to Birmingham and help the city's black community confront segregation. He told them, "I assure you, if you come to Birmingham, we will not only gain prestige but really shake the country." He knew that if the movement could change things in Birmingham, it would reverberate throughout the nation.

And what was the significance of King's "Letter from Birmingham"?

Edward: The Birmingham campaign started out slowly, but after King was arrested on Good Friday for his movement's public demonstration on the streets of Birmingham, things began to change. While in solitary confinement, he was shown a newspaper op-ed column by eight

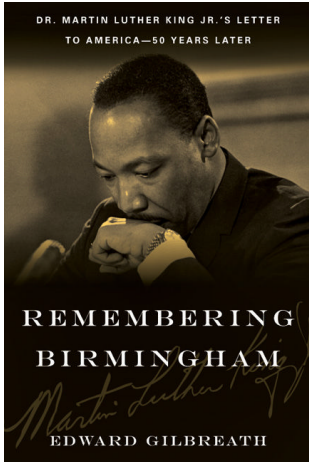
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moderate clergymen in Birmingham. While they supported civil rights for blacks, they felt King and his movement were going about it all wrong. They implored him to wait for the laws to take effect. But King believed the black community had waited long enough, they needed to take a stand and stir the conscience of Birmingham and of the nation. His response to the op-ed was a passionate letter that spelled out the reasons why the movement couldn't wait and pointed out the differences between just and unjust laws. He wrote the letter on the margins of the newspaper, on scraps of any paper he could gather, and when he ran out, he reportedly wrote on the toilet paper in his cell. After its publication weeks later, the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" would become one of the most lucid and convincing arguments for social justice and civil rights that we've ever had. What's more, it was rooted in the theology and principles of the Christian gospel.

What is significant about the "Letter from Birmingham" for us now?

Edward: Today, in many ways, we've allowed our politics to divide us and define who we are as people of faith. King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" challenges us to strip away the cultural impediments and focus on the essential demands of the gospel and what King called "the beloved community." It's a call to grace, justice, empathy and reconciliation. If we're only interested in loving our neighbor when they live in the same neighborhood as we do or vote for the same candidates as we do, then we've missed the full call of the gospel. In addition, today issues like immigration reform are forcing us to figure out what it means to live out the call of Micah 6:8 "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." In King's day, even the people on his side were telling him to slow down and just wait. He knew that was another way of denying true justice. Today, in regards to many issues, we may face the same dilemma as the American church of 1963: Do we wait or courageously seek to live out the truth of our faith today?

Why do you think King was more a "prophet" of social justice?

Edward: It's easy to want to write Dr. King off as just a leader who gave a good speech. But in doing that, we risk missing the fact that he was vehemently disliked in his day and that as time went on he was becoming increasingly angry and impatient with the pace of change in the nation. Late in his life he wrote that, "Whites are not putting in a mass effort to re-educate themselves out of their racial ignorance." While he rejected the militancy of the Black Power movement, he understood the roots of its members' discontent. As a Christian minister and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, King also felt compelled to speak out against the Vietnam conflict. This also served to land him on some of America's "most hated" lists. In all these cases, he was speaking out as a prophet of social justice. But that's typically not the King that we choose to focus on today.

How do you think we as a society should commemorate this 50-year anniversary of King's work?



Edward: I think it would be good for all of us – the church, local communities, the nation – to read and reflect upon King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” together, and then ask ourselves, what is *just* and *unjust* about our institutions today? And for those who can, I would highly recommend visiting Birmingham as well as other historic landmarks of the civil rights movement. Retracing the steps of the men and women and teenagers who marched for justice in downtown Birmingham can be profound. And a visit to places like Birmingham’s Civil Rights Institute museum, Kelly Ingram Park and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where four little girls were killed by a Ku Klux Klan bomb while they attended Sunday school, can be a life-changing experience. These things can remind us that it wasn’t that long ago that our nation was blinded by the sins of racism and injustice.

What was your hope as you wrote *Remembering Birmingham*?

Edward: First of all, I feel totally inadequate for the task. I mean, there’s a multitude of books about King and the civil rights movement, so who am I to think that I have something fresh to say? At the same time, I felt compelled to tell the story from the perspective of an African American evangelical who was born a year after Dr. King’s death. Many people from my generation and younger don’t always have a full picture of who King really was – his courage, his radicalism, his faith, his humanity. I wanted to shed light on these aspects of King and, above all, show the church that everything he did was driven by his Christian faith and values. I hope *Remembering Birmingham* can be an entry way for some to discover King anew.

You have a more extensive book, *The Birmingham Revolution*, coming out next fall. How is that different than *Remembering Birmingham*?

Edward: *Remembering Birmingham* focuses on the events of Birmingham in April 1963, *The Birmingham Revolution* will take a more extensive survey of King’s life, both before and after Birmingham. It’s a dynamic story, replete with action, drama and compelling ideas. I believe the Birmingham campaign was the touchstone for all that came before and all that would follow in King’s brief but remarkable thirty-nine years of life and ministry, and *The Birmingham Revolution* will help readers understand why.



Edward Gilbreath

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Edward Gilbreath is an award-winning journalist and author. An editor at large for *Christianity Today*, Ed was formerly the editor of *Today's Christian* magazine and the founding editor of Urban Ministries Inc.'s online magazine, *UrbanFaith.com*.

In the late 1990s he was associate editor of *New Man*, the official magazine of the Promise Keepers men's ministry. In addition to his editorial work, he has written award-winning articles and is the coauthor of the book *Gospel Trailblazer: An African-American Preacher's Historic Journey Across Racial Lines* (Moody, 2003) – the autobiography of the late evangelist Howard Jones, the first black associate on Billy Graham's crusade team.

Among his many groundbreaking articles for *Christianity Today* are his award-winning profile of polarizing civil rights leader Jesse Jackson and a seminal piece on African American evangelist Tom Skinner and the history of the modern black evangelical movement.

Ed's most recent book, *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity* (IVP, 2006), was a 2007 Merit Award winner in *Christianity Today's* annual Book Awards. Since the release of *Reconciliation Blues*, he has spoken to thousands of people across the nation at churches, conferences and university campuses on issues of race, faith and culture.

Ed earned his bachelor's in communication arts from Judson University and a master's in philosophy of history from Olivet Nazarene University. Ed's mission, both professionally and personally, is to be a bridge-builder, bringing people together across racial, denominational and cultural lines. He lives in the Chicago area with his wife, Dana, and their two children. Visit him at www.edgilbreath.com.