

Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement

Grade Level: 7 – 9

Time Required: About 30 minutes per activity

Historical Thinking Skill: Analysis

Objective: Students will utilize primary source readings and photographs to better understand the purpose and tactics of the Civil Rights movement while exploring connections with related contemporary issues.

Required Materials:

1. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”
2. Selected photographs from the period

Civil Rights: guarantees of equal social opportunities and equal protection under the law, regardless of race, religion, or other personal characteristics. (Source: Britannica)

I. Civic Rights and Rhetoric (Persuasive Speech)

Perhaps no individual in American history was more eloquent and moving than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Below is a passage from his now world-famous 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” The letter, published in a local newspaper, was a response to local ministers who had criticized King for causing civil disorder in the city. Read the excerpt from the letter and answer the following questions.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963)

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 which spitefully use you, and persecute you.” Was not Amos an extremist for justice: “Let justice roll down like waters 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.” Was not Martin Luther an extremist: “Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God.” And John Bunyan: “I will stay in hail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.” And Abraham Lincoln: “This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.” And Thomas Jefferson: “We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal...” 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? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In what dramatic scene on Calvary’s hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists...

Before closing I feel impelled to mention one other point in your statement that has troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping “order” and “preventing violence.” I doubt that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen if you were to observe their ugly and inhumane treatment of Negroes here in the city jail...

Reflection Questions: These can be answered by students individually, or you can host a group discussion. Possible responses or ideas for discussion are included with each question.

1. How does King use religion, specifically Christianity, to strengthen his appeal?
 - The spiritual equality that is inherent in Christianity: forgiveness, redemptive qualities, etc.
2. Do you think we tend to think of extremists in a negative light? How does King turn around this charge that the ministers have leveled at him? Do you find his argument convincing?
 - What does “extremist” actually mean? Have students look it up.
 - Do we have to be extreme to draw public scrutiny to a problem?
3. Where does Dr. King reference the Declaration of Independence? What was his point in doing so?
 - “We hold these truths to be self-evident...”
 - Dr. King’s faith in our founding document
 - Dr. King’s challenge to Americans to live up to its aspirational nature
4. Why does Dr. King bother to respond to ministers, who have no political power in America?
 - The era in which he lived was a much more religious than today; nearly all Birmingham leaders would have attended church, and ministers had a public platform every Sunday
 - What if the ministers were silent? Would that make them complicit?
5. What emotional response (such as pity, guilt, or shame) is this letter designed to bring out in the readers? Explain.
 - There is no right or wrong answer. Ask students if they believe people should be publicly shamed.



II. Civil Rights and Protest

Public demonstrations and boycotts are perhaps the oldest form of protest to secure rights in our history. Going back to the Boston Tea Party in 1773, Americans have used these tactics to seek and obtain the rights they believe they are due. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60's effectively made extensive use of such practices.

Below are three pictures from this era. Students can respond to the reflection questions for each image independently, in small groups, or as a class.

A.



1. Why does the woman on the left have a reference to communists on her sign?
2. Who is the audience these women are trying to reach? Whites or Blacks? Both? Explain.

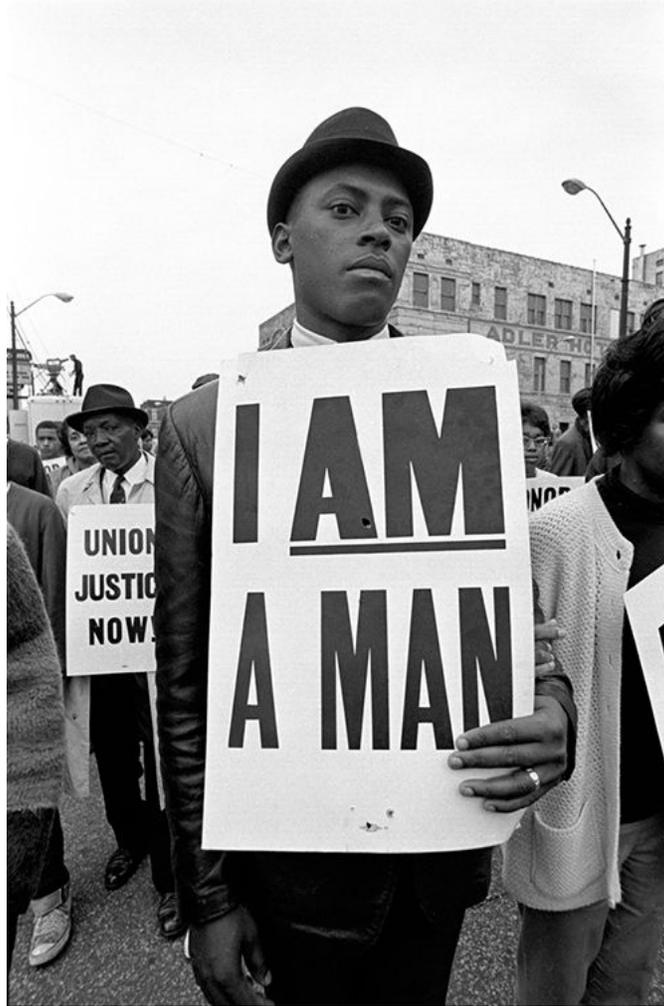


B.



1. What is the meaning of this woman's sign?
2. Do you see a connection to Dr. King's letter? Explain.

C.



1. How has this man created such a powerful message with so few words?
2. What did he intend his audience to think about?

Summary Question: Which of the signs above do students think was the most creative and effective? Explain.

III. Civil Rights, Free Speech, and Property Rights Today



Many supporters of racial segregation argued that private businesses had the legal right to deny service to customers, arguing that if they did not like the policy, they were free to spend their money elsewhere. The owner of the restaurant in the picture above boldly makes this claim as protestors promote a boycott.

Today many companies, including tech companies such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, reserve the right under their Terms of Service (TOS), which we must agree to as a condition of usage, to remove text or images, particularly relating to political and cultural matters, they find objectionable or determine to be misleading. They can also ban individuals, for example, former President Donald Trump, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, and radio host Alex Jones. Those companies make a similar argument, namely that they are private companies so they can set their own rules and people are free to use alternative platforms or methods of communications. Opponents maintain that the companies are virtual monopolies thus such choice does not truly exist.

Reflection Questions: These can be completed independently, in small groups, or as a class. Possible responses, or ideas for discussion are included with each question.

1. Are the two cases similar? Is a tech company banning someone the same as a restaurant owner doing so? Why or why not?
 - Exclusion centered on race is fundamentally different than exclusion based on speech. You have no choice over the former but do have a choice in the latter.
 - Civil rights ideas were considered by many to be very dangerous, inflammatory, and inspired by communists. Would tech companies have banned them based on their TOS today?

- Remind students that ideas we accept today (e.g.—gay rights, interracial marriage, female police officers, etc.) were until recently very unpopular and controversial. What if social media existed then and advocates of those ideas had been banned?
 - Is it better to allow unpleasant ideas to circulate and be exposed to critique?
 - What if Dr. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” had been banned?
2. Internet access is unquestionably a major part of our lives today. Some would argue it is essential—on par with water, food, and housing—and maintain it is a human right. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Many small businesses depend on Facebook and Instagram. If it is a civil right, is government therefore obligated to help people pay for internet access as it does with food and housing?
 - Should the government ensure that unpopular ideas have a public forum?
3. Just as the federal government interceded into the segregation issue during the 1960s, should it also do so today to regulate the tech industry policies described above? Explain and defend your response.
- Both involve interstate commerce, which Congress has the Constitutional right to regulate.
 - Do you have a Constitutional right to be on social media? If so, what is it?
 - The federal government cannot prevent private companies from dismissing employees based on speech issues, so should it have the power to regulate them on tech platforms? If so, what unintended problems could this create?
 - Ask students to think about and develop universal standards for all citizens.

