King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ (1963)

1. **A Thesis** - The right response is to stage and participate in a 4-step nonviolent campaign, i.e., fact-gathering, negotiation, self-purification, direct action.

2. **Premises:**

   a. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (p. 2)

   b. “[W]e endured postponement after postponement; ‘Justice too long delayed is justice denied’” (pp. 3-4)

   c. “It is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily…Groups tend to be more immoral than individuals (p. 3).

   d. It can be supported biblically, by the Christian tradition, and historically recognized ‘just’ examples (p. 6)

   e. “The Negro’s great stumbling block” is not “the Ku Klux Klanner,” but the white moderate who prefers a “negative peace” to a “positive peace” (p. 6)

   f. Campaign is “the more excellent of love,” charting a middle course between “the ‘do-nothingism of the complacent” and “the hatred and despair of the black nationalist” (p. 7)
3. Responding to objections:

   a. Advocating violent tension v. creating constructive, dialogue-forcing tension (p. 3).

   b. We should not avoid confronting injustice because it may induce violent reactions (p. 7)

   c. Christian doctrines do not support inaction or silence in the face of injustice (p. 7)

   d. The Christian tradition allows for violating man-made laws that do not accord with the law of God; unjust laws are those that “distort the soul and damages the personality,” relegate “persons to the status of things,” or encourage “separation” and “estrangement” (p. 5)

   e. Laws and policies are unjust because they violate American conception of political justice; unjust laws are those that are binding only on a minority group, where the minority has “no part in enacting or devising the law,” or are applied unconstitutionally (Ibid.)

   f. Violating an unjust law “openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty” expresses “the highest respect for the law” (Ibid.)

   g. There are many examples of righteous extremists (p. 8)