



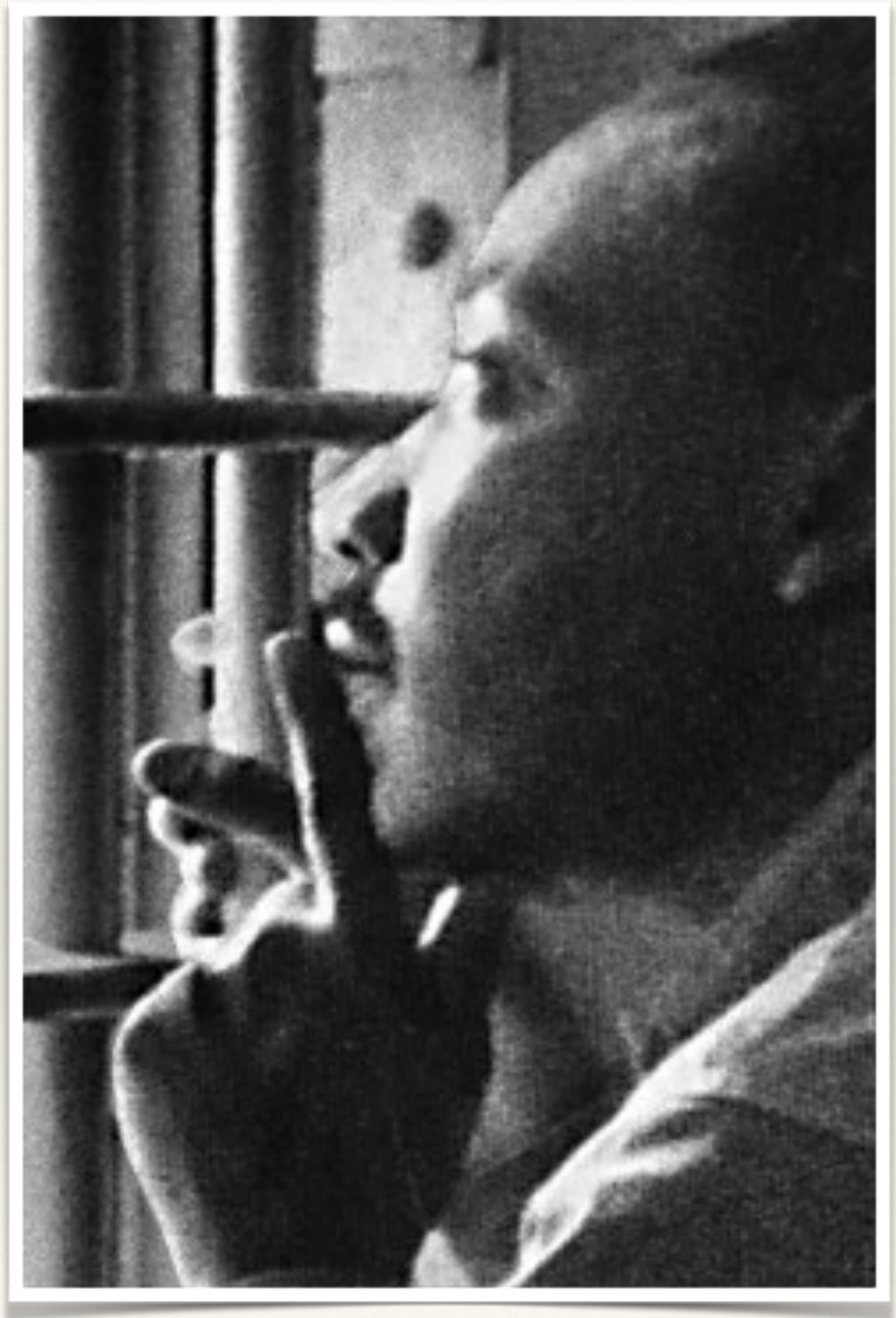
Rev. King, with Reverend Ralph Abernathy (center) and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth

Teaching “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

*Don Pogreba
Helena High School*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“With patient and firm determination we will press on until every valley of despair is exalted to new peaks of hope, until every mountain of pride and irrationality is made low by the levelling process of humility and compassion; until the rough places of injustice are transformed into a smooth plane of equality of opportunity; and until the crooked places of prejudice are transformed by the straightening process of bright-eyed wisdom.”



Martin Luther King, Jr. Life

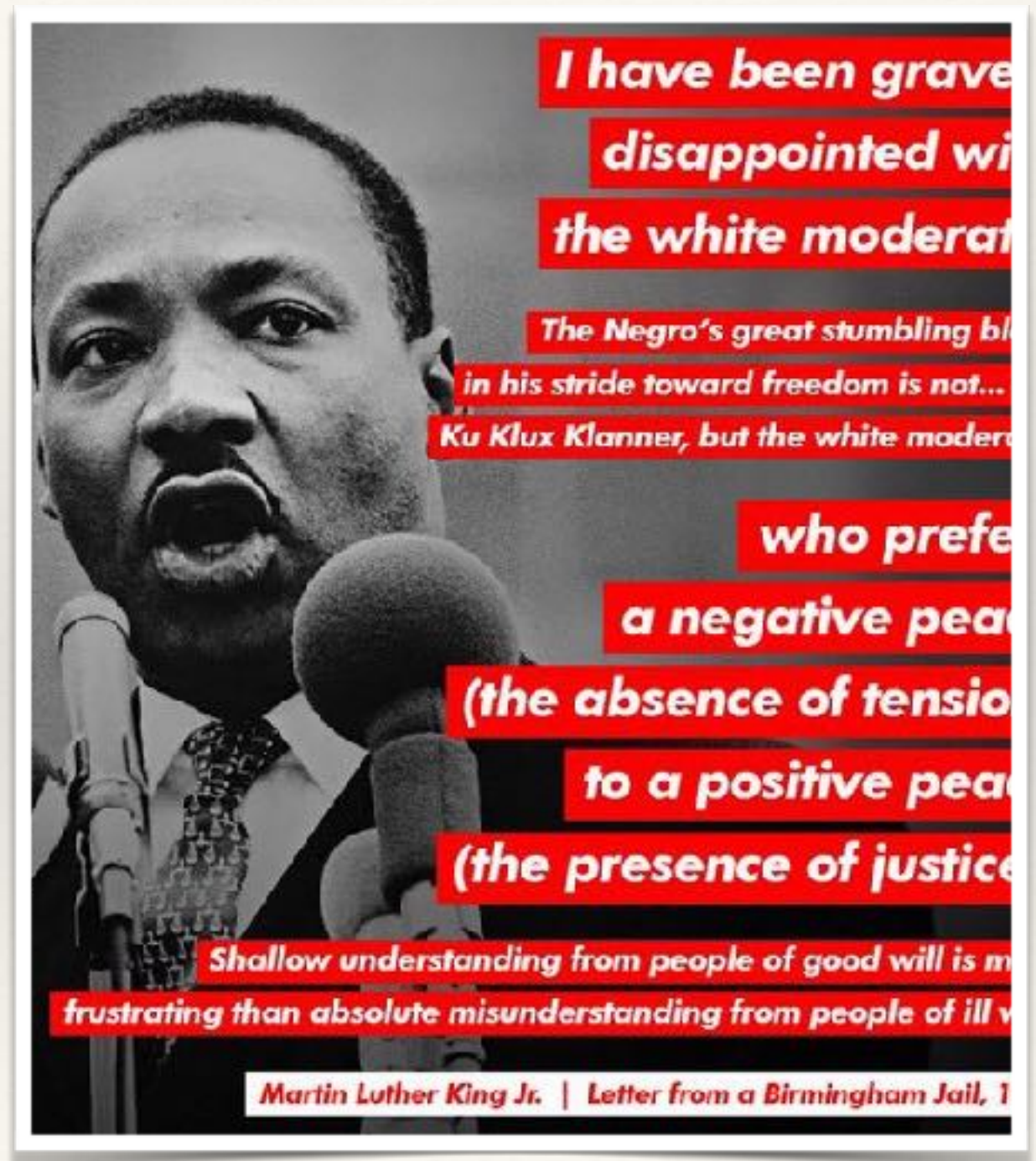
- ❖ King was born in Atlanta in 1929 and became a third generation pastor.
- ❖ King began his ministry in 1954 as the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.
- ❖ He received a Doctorate of Philosophy in Systematic Theology from Boston University.
- ❖ In 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, sparking the modern Civil Rights Movement. King was called in to help lead the protests.
- ❖ King averaged 208 speeches a year for the rest of his life.
- ❖ In August of 1963, he was the lead speaker and organizer of the March on Washington, during which 250,000 civil rights activists came to Washington, D.C. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1965.
- ❖ He was assassinated in 1968.

“He harkened back to 1958 in New York City when a mad black woman stabbed him and left a blade stuck in his chest. A doctor informed him that if he had sneezed, he would have died. King told the audience about a letter he had received from a white girl in White Plains, New York, who wrote, “Dear Dr. King, ... I’m so happy that you didn’t sneeze.” Then he said to the Memphis crowd, “[And] I want to say tonight that I, too, am happy that I didn’t sneeze.” If he had sneezed, King reflected, he “wouldn’t have been around here” for the sit-ins in 1960 or when “we decided to take a ride for freedom and ended segregation in interstate travel.” If he had sneezed, he would have missed Albany, Georgia, when Negroes decided to “straighten their backs up.” And “I wouldn’t have been here in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill.”

–Jonathan Rieder. *Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle That Changed a Nation*

His Commitment to Non-Violence

- ❖ “Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him. Martin Luther King, Jr.”
- ❖ For King, non-violence did not mean abandoning righteous anger as the Letter makes clear.
- ❖ During a meeting of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a man rose up from the audience, leapt onto the stage and smashed King in the face. Punched him hard. And then punched him again. After the first punch, Branch recounts, King just dropped his hands and stood there, allowed the assailant (who turned out to be a member of the American Nazi Party) to punch him again. And when King’s associates tried to step in King stopped them: “Don’t touch him!” King shouted. “Don’t touch him. We have to pray for him.”



Bombingham

Birmingham, Alabama

“The most segregated city in America.”



The Birmingham Campaign

- ❖ In the spring of 1963, activists in Birmingham, Alabama launched one of the most influential campaigns of the Civil Rights Movement: Project C, better known as The Birmingham Campaign.
- ❖ It would be the beginning of a series of lunch counter sit-ins, marches on City Hall and boycotts on downtown merchants to protest segregation laws in the city.
- ❖ Birmingham was known as the most segregated city in America, and the site of bombings and terrorist attacks.
- ❖ The local segregation code commanded separation in incredible detail. The section “Negro and White Persons Not To Play Together” not only made it illegal for blacks and whites to play “any game of cards or dice, dominoes or checkers,” it also forbade “any person who, being the owner, proprietor or keeper or superintendent of any tavern, inn, restaurant or other public house or public place, or the clerk, service or employee of such owner, proper” from permitting it.
- ❖ Their actions were in response to the brutal treatment of African-Americans, led by “Bull” Connor, who turned dogs and firehoses on protesters.

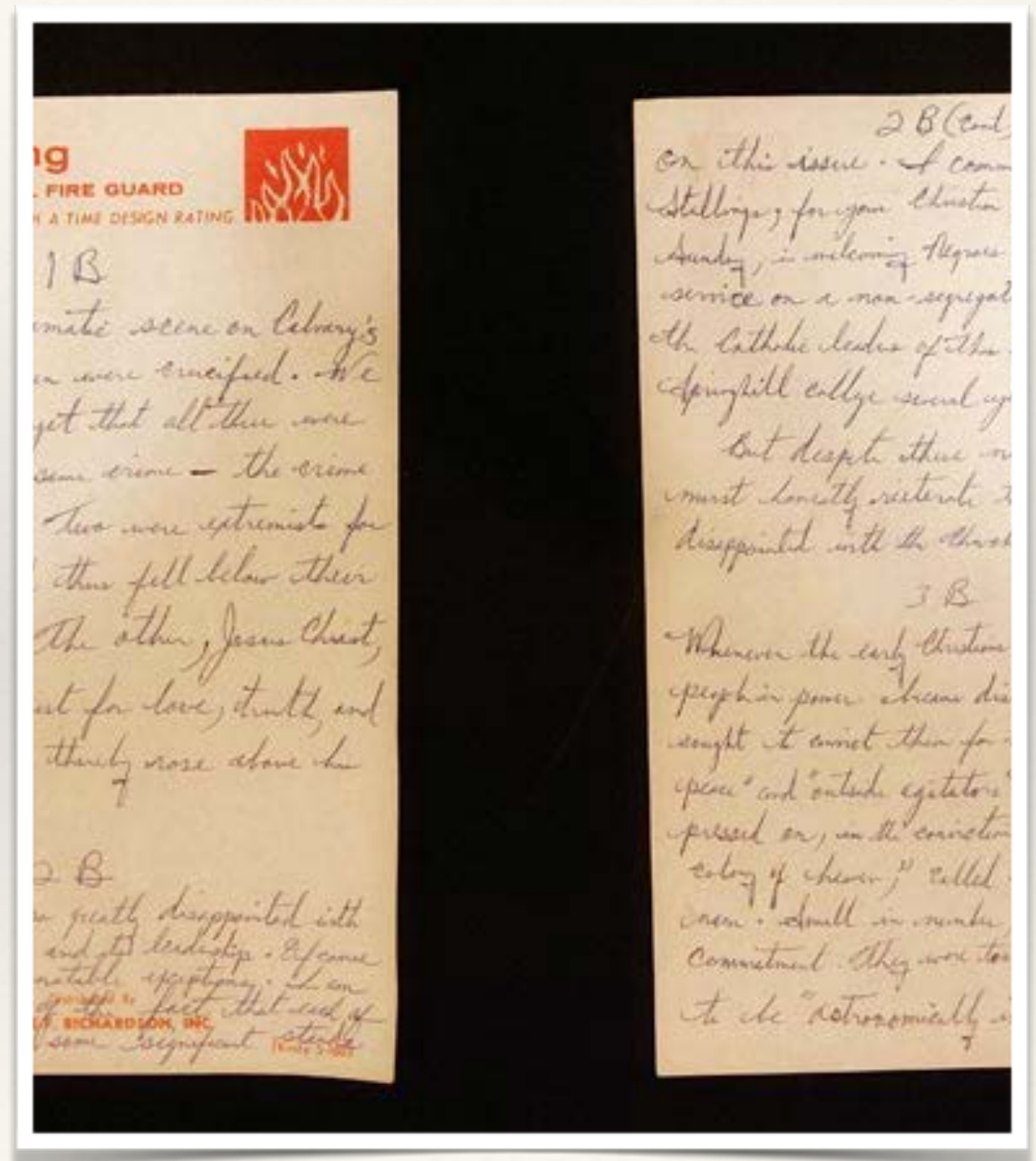
Birmingham's Savagery

Birmingham would supply the savagery and the sacraments. That savagery was notable even by the standards of the Deep South. Birmingham was widely viewed as the most segregated city in the United States. Racial terrorism was commonplace. The bombing of ordinary black homeowners was so prolific that it yielded nicknames for a neighborhood (Dynamite Hill) and the city (Bombingham). On a whim, members of one of its many Ku Klux Klan affiliates kidnapped a black pedestrian, Edward Aaron, out for a walk with his girlfriend. After they forced him to crawl and choose between death or castration, they emasculated him and doused his bleeding wound with turpentine. But first one of them told him, "Well, I want you to carry a message to Shuttlesworth. I want you to tell him to stop sending nigger children and white children to school together or we're gonna do him like we're fixing to do you." For daring to defy white supremacy, Rev. Charles Billups, a key Shuttlesworth ally in the ACMHR, was kidnapped and blindfolded, beaten with chains, tied to a tree, and branded on the stomach with the letters KKK.

Jonathan Rieder *Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle That Changed a Nation*

The High Mark of the Civil Rights Movement

- ❖ Over the next couple months, the peaceful demonstrations would be met with violent attacks using high-pressure fire hoses and police dogs on men, women and children alike -- producing some of the most iconic and troubling images of the Civil Rights Movement.
- ❖ President John F. Kennedy would later say, "The events in Birmingham... have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them."
- ❖ It is considered one of the major turning points in the Civil Rights Movement and the "beginning of the end" of a centuries-long struggle for freedom.



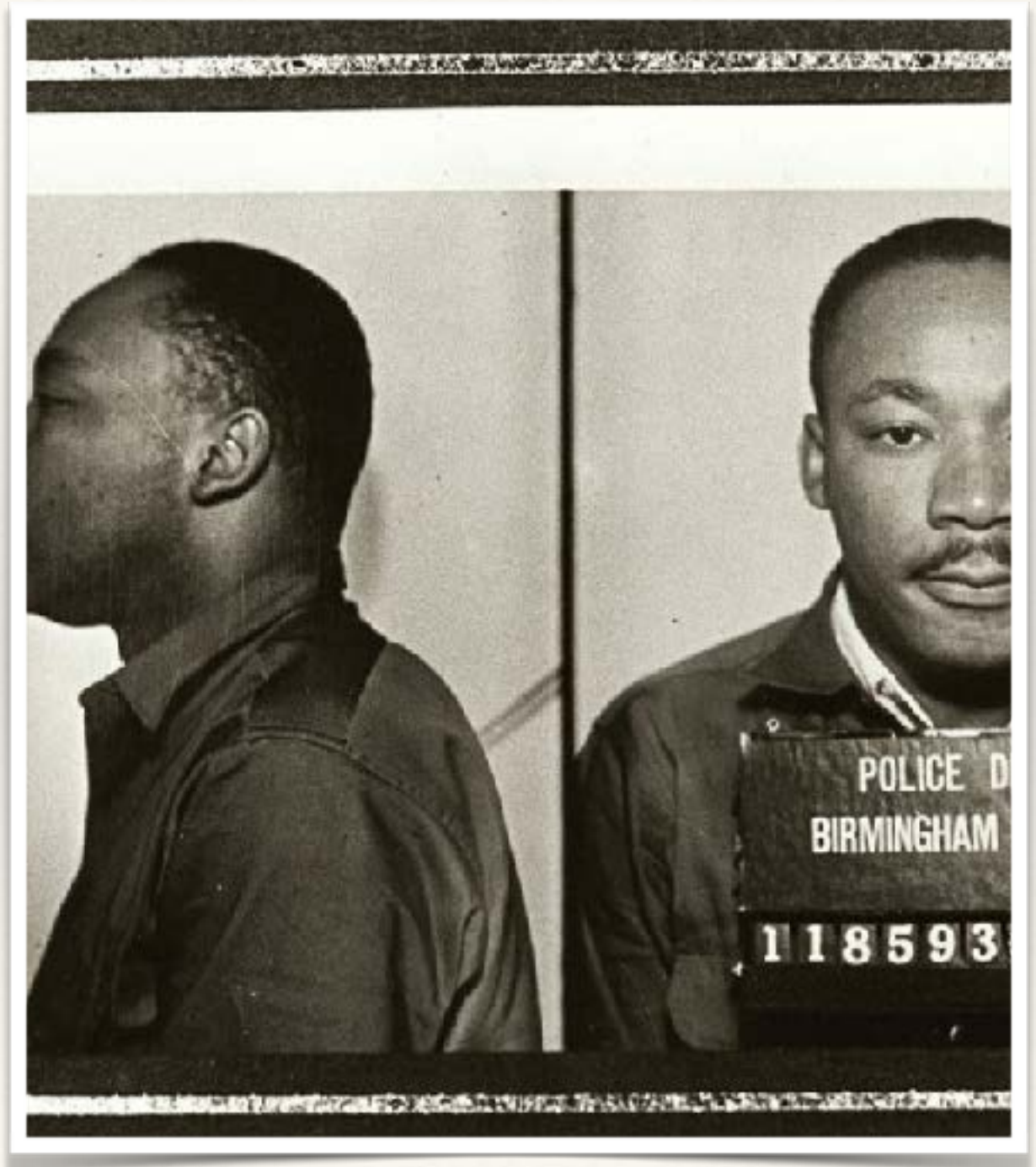
Project C

- ❖ Given the failure of negotiation, the civil rights movement, led by King, initiated Project C—for confrontation.
- ❖ The campaign used a variety of nonviolent methods of confrontation, including sit-ins at libraries and lunch counters, kneel-ins by black visitors at white churches, and a march to the county building to mark the beginning of a voter-registration drive.
- ❖ King believed that success would be found in **dramatizing** the struggle for equality and that **creative tension** was necessary to create the conditions for change.



King's Arrest

- ❖ The city got an injunction against protests, with Connor promising to arrest anyone promoting "inter-racial discord."
- ❖ After serious prayer and reflection, King decided to violate the injunction and was arrested on Good Friday, his 13th arrest.
- ❖ King was denied a lawyer for 24 hours and ended up spending 8 eight days in jail.
- ❖ He wrote Letter from a Birmingham Jail on scraps of paper.
- ❖ Most historians of the civil rights movement believe everything from the arrest to the letter, was pre-planned.



April 16, 1963

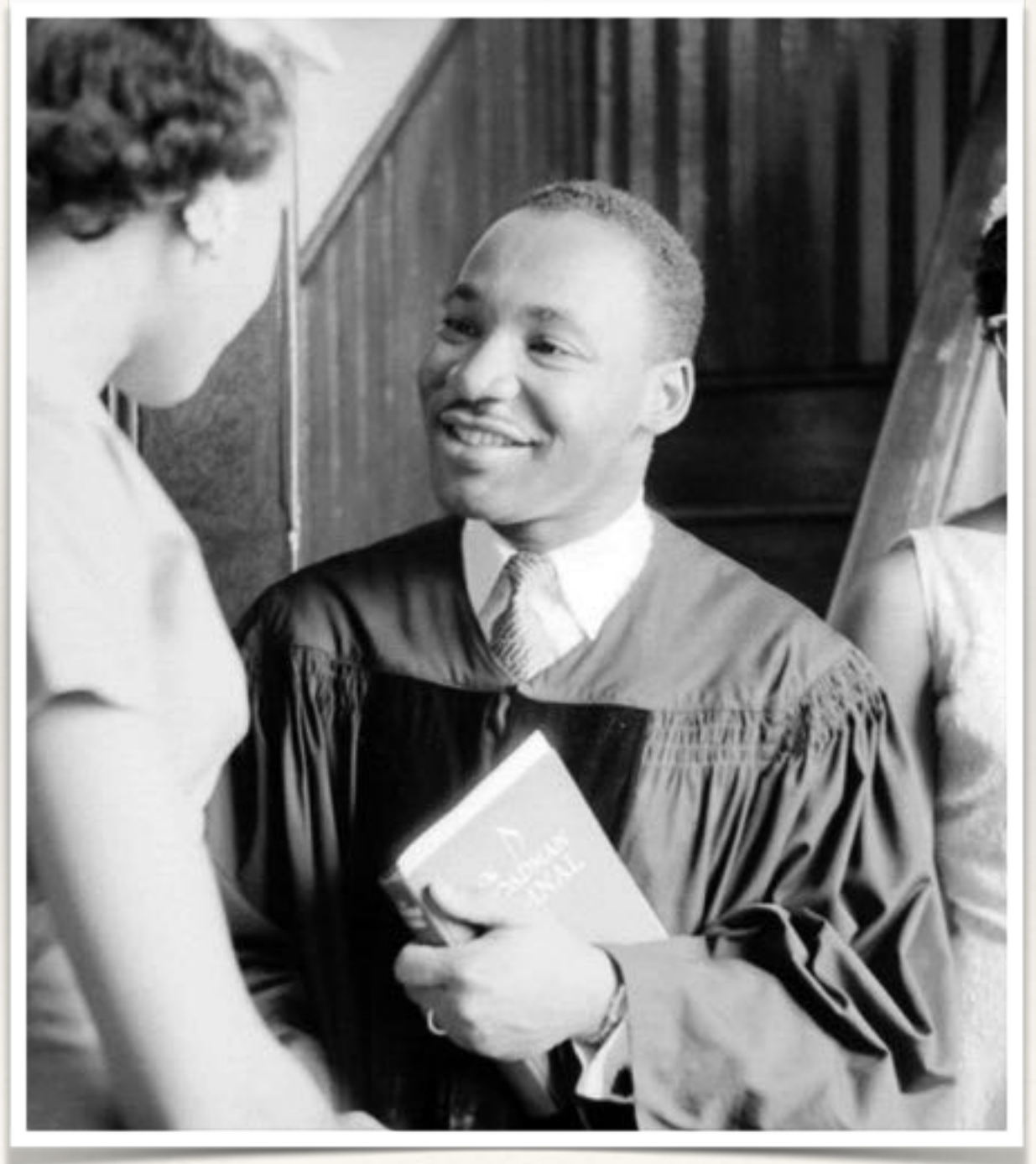
The Letter

"Never before have I written so long a letter. I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?"



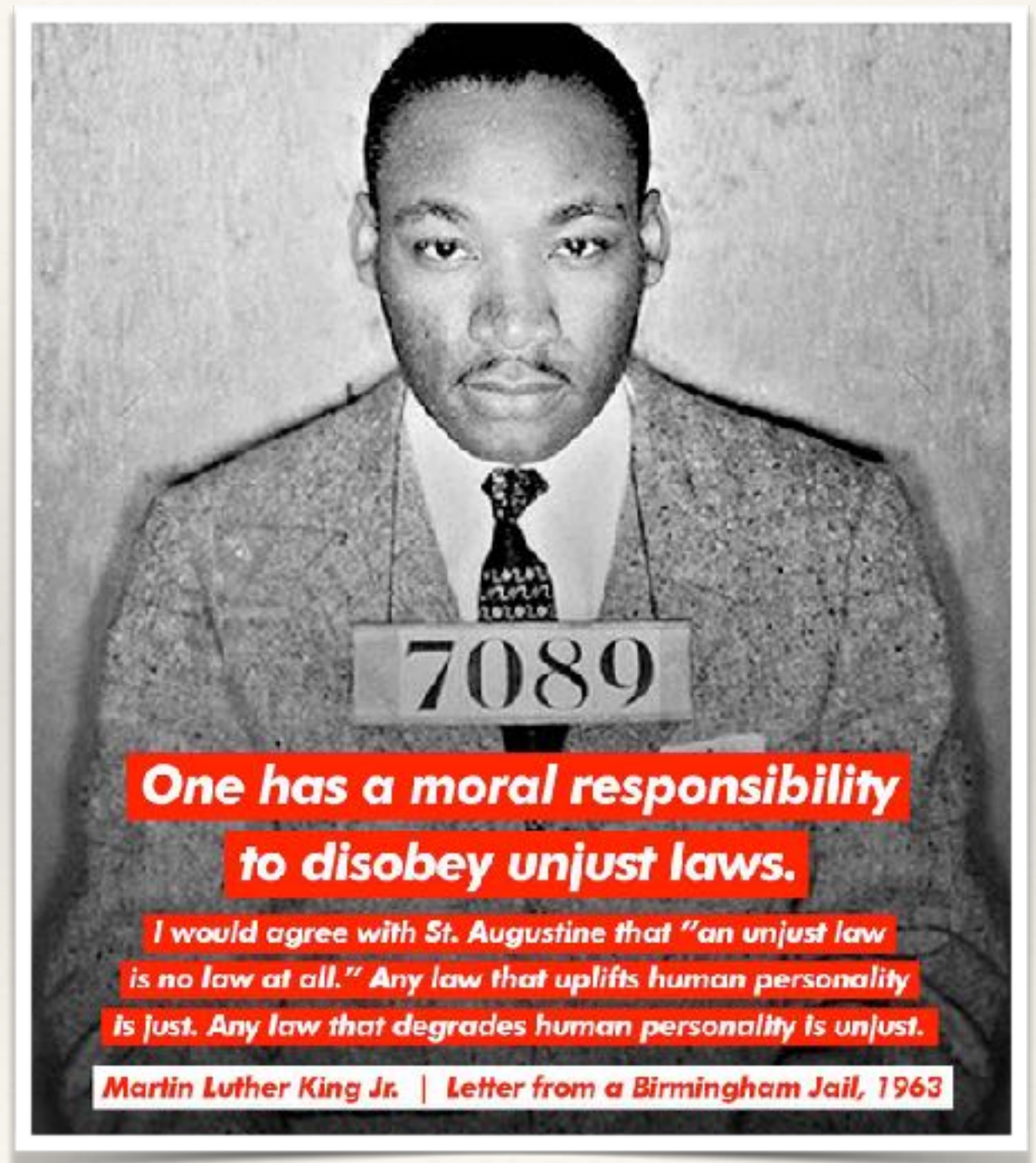
The Origins and Writing of the Letter

- ❖ The letter is dated April 16, 1963 and defends the policy of non-violent resistance to government oppression.
- ❖ Because King was initially deprived of writing paper, he poured his first rejoinders onto the margins of the newspaper and then onto toilet tissue.
- ❖ Prison offered one advantage: the toilet paper was rough enough to write on. After a few days, King gained access to writing paper, a pen, and an array of smuggling lawyers.
- ❖ Part of a transmission belt between King and Walker, they relayed King's initial drafts and later corrections to Walker, who deciphered King's chicken scratch scrawl arrows indicating the flow of the argument. He then translated them for his secretary, who typed them before Walker sent them back to King in prison.



A Response to White Ministers

- ❖ The letter is framed as a response to a collection of white ministers, who called MLK an outside agitator who was in Birmingham to cause trouble.
- ❖ They agreed that social injustices existed but argued that the battle against racial segregation should be fought solely in the courts, not the streets.
- ❖ He uses the framework of responding to their concern to articulate his vision for the civil rights movement and to criticize the weakness of whites who did not see they were part of the problem.



Structure of the Letter

- ❖ **I. Introduction:** the occasion and objective (Paragraph 1)
- ❖ **II. Answering Clergymen's Questions**
 - ❖ Why are you here? (2-4)
 - ❖ Why are you not negotiating? (5-11)
 - ❖ Aren't your actions poorly timed? (12-14)
 - ❖ How can you justify breaking the law? (15-22)



Structure of the Letter

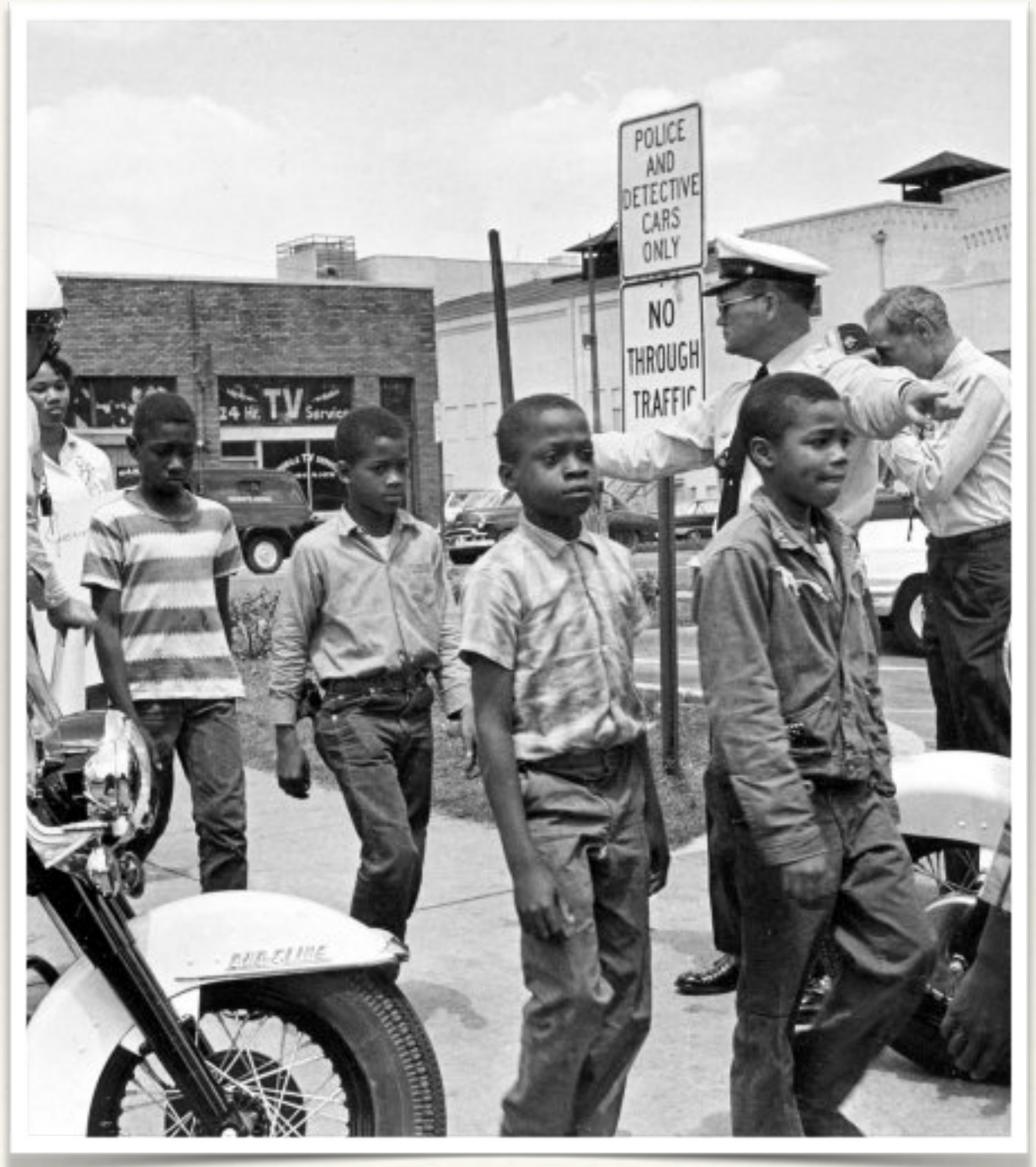
- ❖ **III. Critique of White Moderates and the Church**
 - ❖ His disappointment with white moderates (23-47)
 - ❖ His disappointment with the white churches and their leaders (33-44)
 - ❖ His disappointment with the clergymen for not condemning the police (45-47)
- ❖ **IV. Conclusion**
 - ❖ Conciliatory Gestures towards his audience and hope for unity (48-50)



Themes: Time to Act is Now

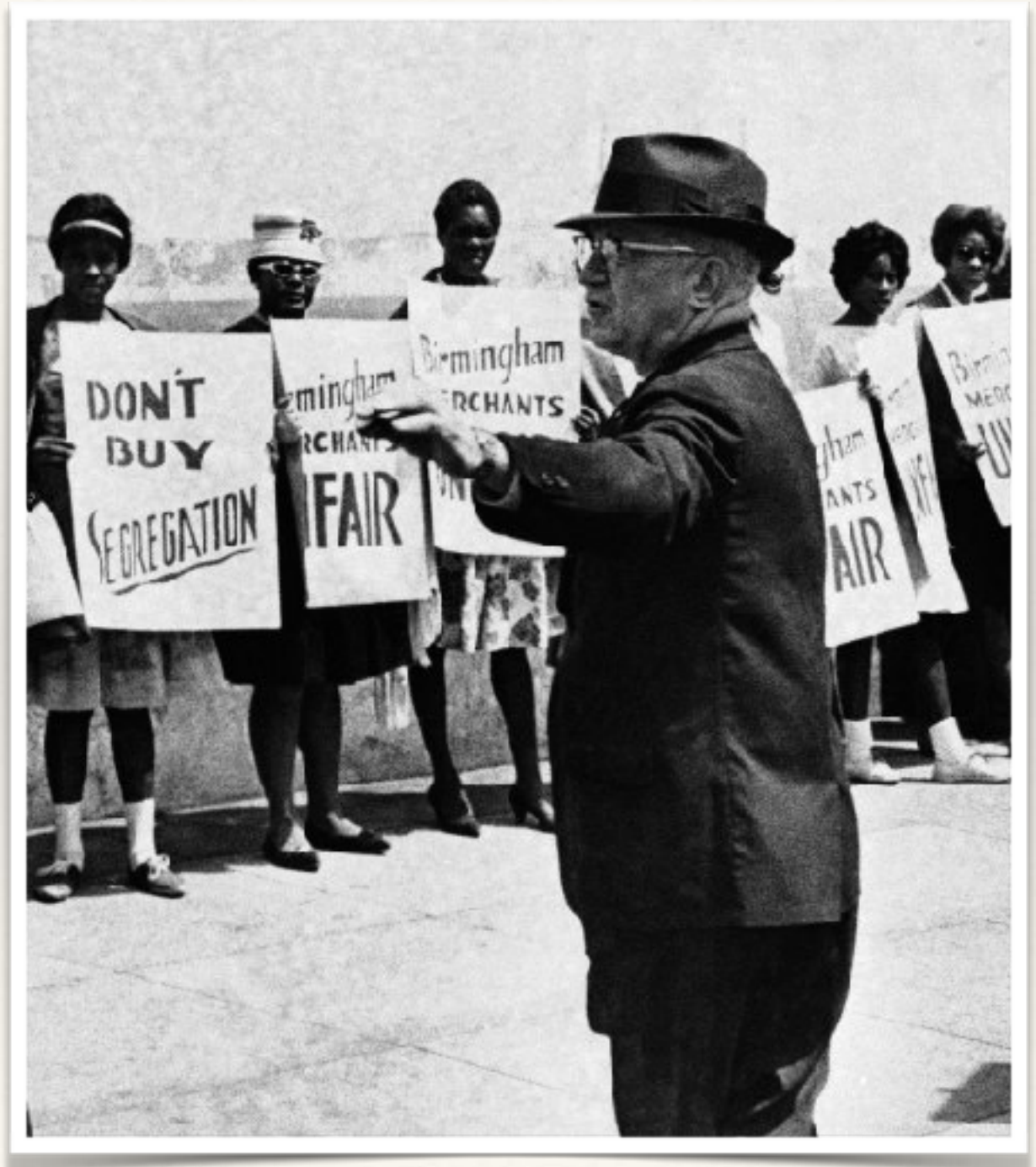
King forcefully rejects the calls to wait, for the African-American community to be patient, explaining both the length of time their oppression has endured and the need to enact change for children now.

He condemns those who call for history to change on its own, arguing that social change only comes through committed action.



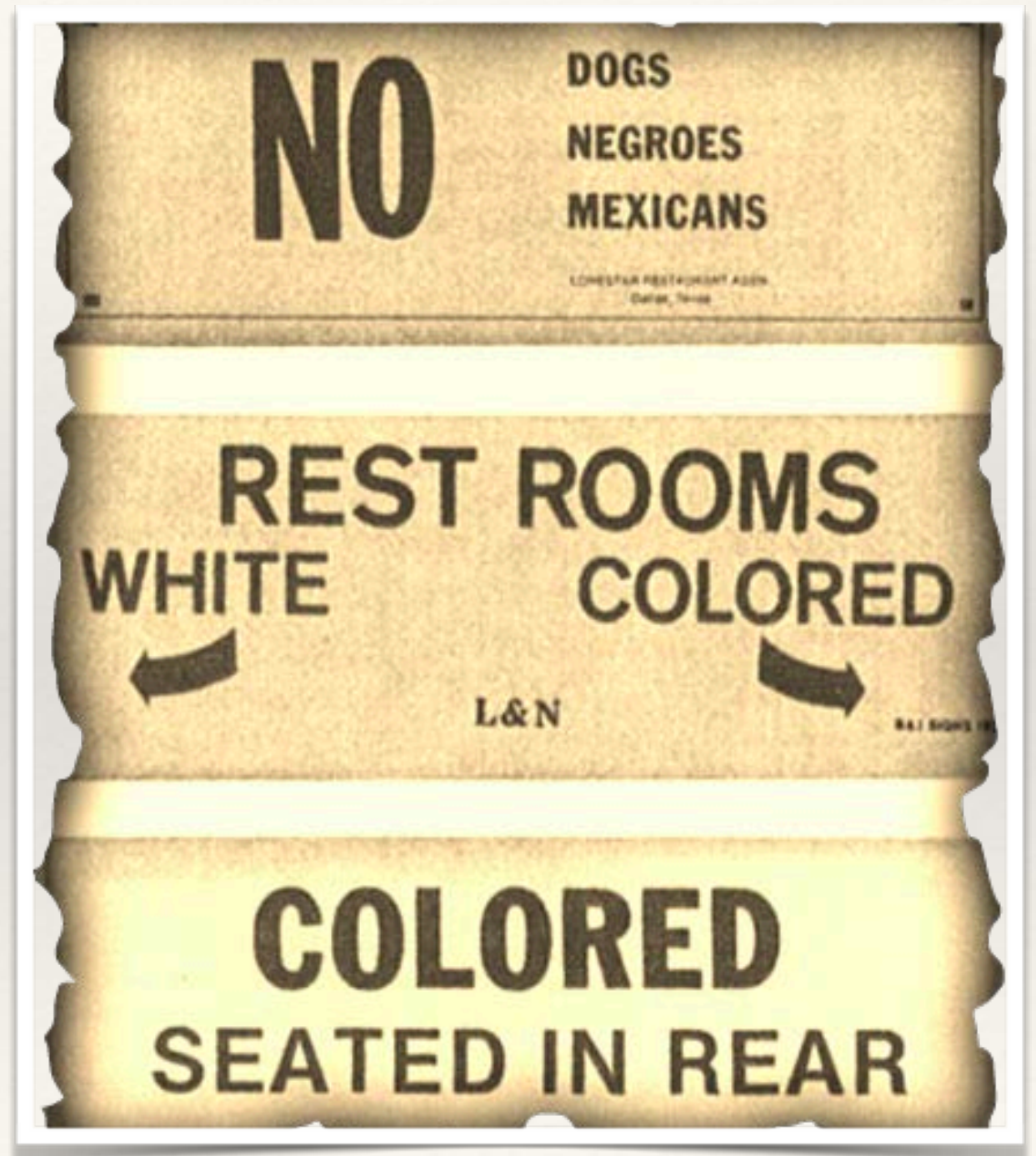
Themes: Civil Disobedience

- ❖ King argues his vision for civil disobedience, explaining:
 - ❖ how one can tell if a law is unjust.
 - ❖ how one must act when she breaks the law.
 - ❖ how history has proven the need and justification for non-violent resistance to oppression
- ❖ King calls on his followers to become “extremists” for love and justice.



Themes: Brotherhood to Criticism

As we move through the “Letter,” we witness a striking transformation. In the first half, we are mainly in the presence of a patient and gracious man, who crafts little moments of brotherhood and tries to win over his critics through appeals to their reason, sympathy, and conscience. But around the midpoint, there’s a distinct shift, really a second act. King drops the mask. He begins to speak more bluntly. Instead of explaining himself, he chides and criticizes. He shows himself to be not just a black man but an angry black man. The diplomat gives way to the prophet. — Jonathan Rieder



Themes: The Hidden Shame of American Racism

- ❖ He did not think that many whites had much empathy. He grasped the flawed nature of democracy in America.
- ❖ His indignation reached beyond vitriolic racists and the eight clergymen who criticized the Birmingham insurgency. He took aim at the core of American culture, the vast universe of people who imagined themselves to be decent but never dwelled on the shame of American racism.
- ❖ He was not naive about the power of soaring moral rhetoric to change hearts. King did not rest his optimism on faith in the American dream or the ordained nature of freedom in America. Instead, he found solace in his deep love of black people and the exceptional spirit of the slave ancestors.
- ❖ In all these ways, the “Letter” anticipates the King of the later years who thundered against poverty, racism, and war before he was assassinated in 1968.



Teaching Guides and More

Resources

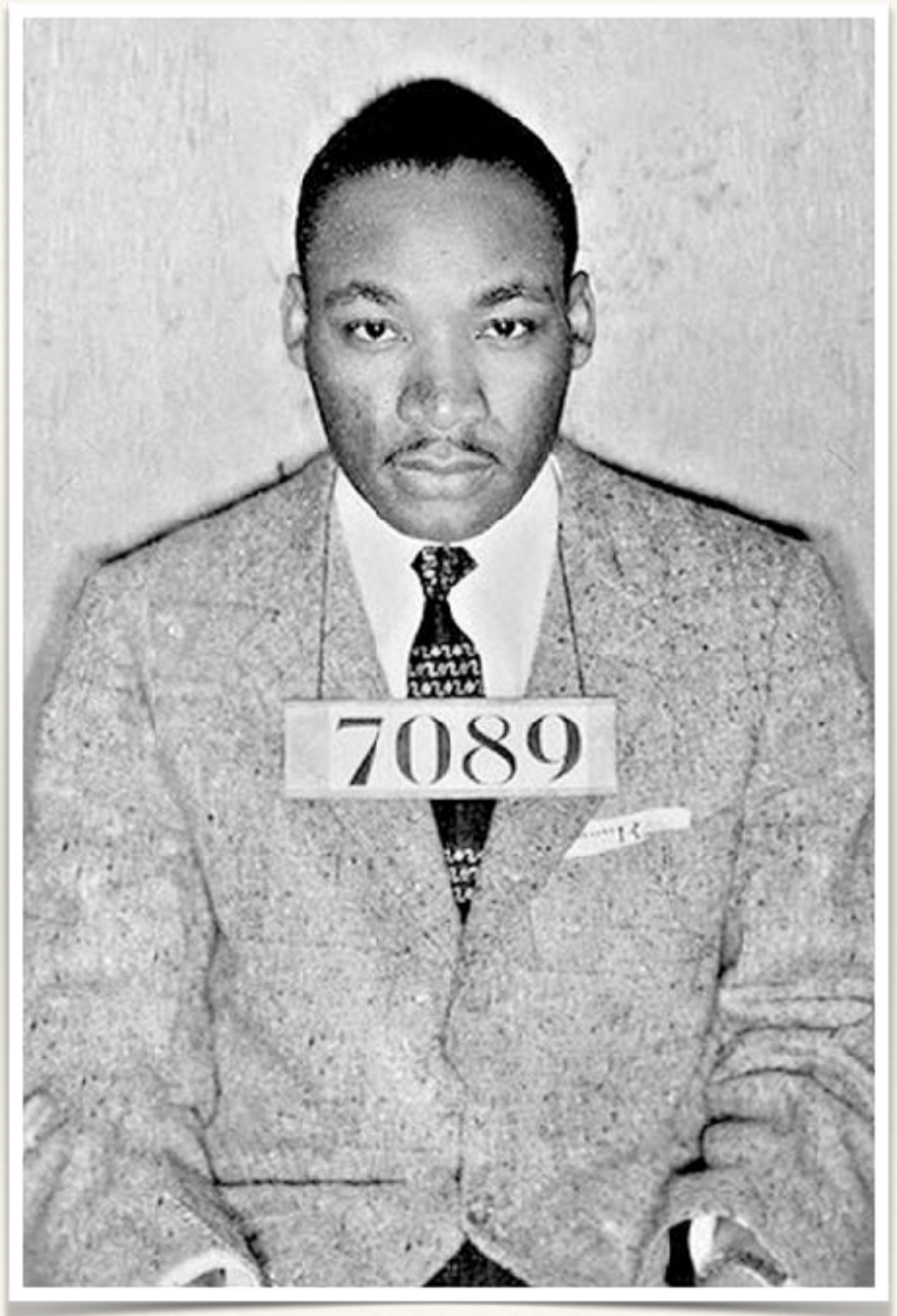
“Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.”



Lorem Ipsum Dolor

Rhetorical Devices

“The Letter is compelling as well on literary grounds. Its swerves and swings are remarkable. One moment it offers reflective argument ; the next it crackles with prophetic anger. The poise and politesse of the author dissolve into hints of sarcastic disdain , passive aggression , even self - pity . King drops the names of revered philosophers but leavens his erudition with a voyage into the inner recesses of black vulnerability.” —Jonathan Rieder



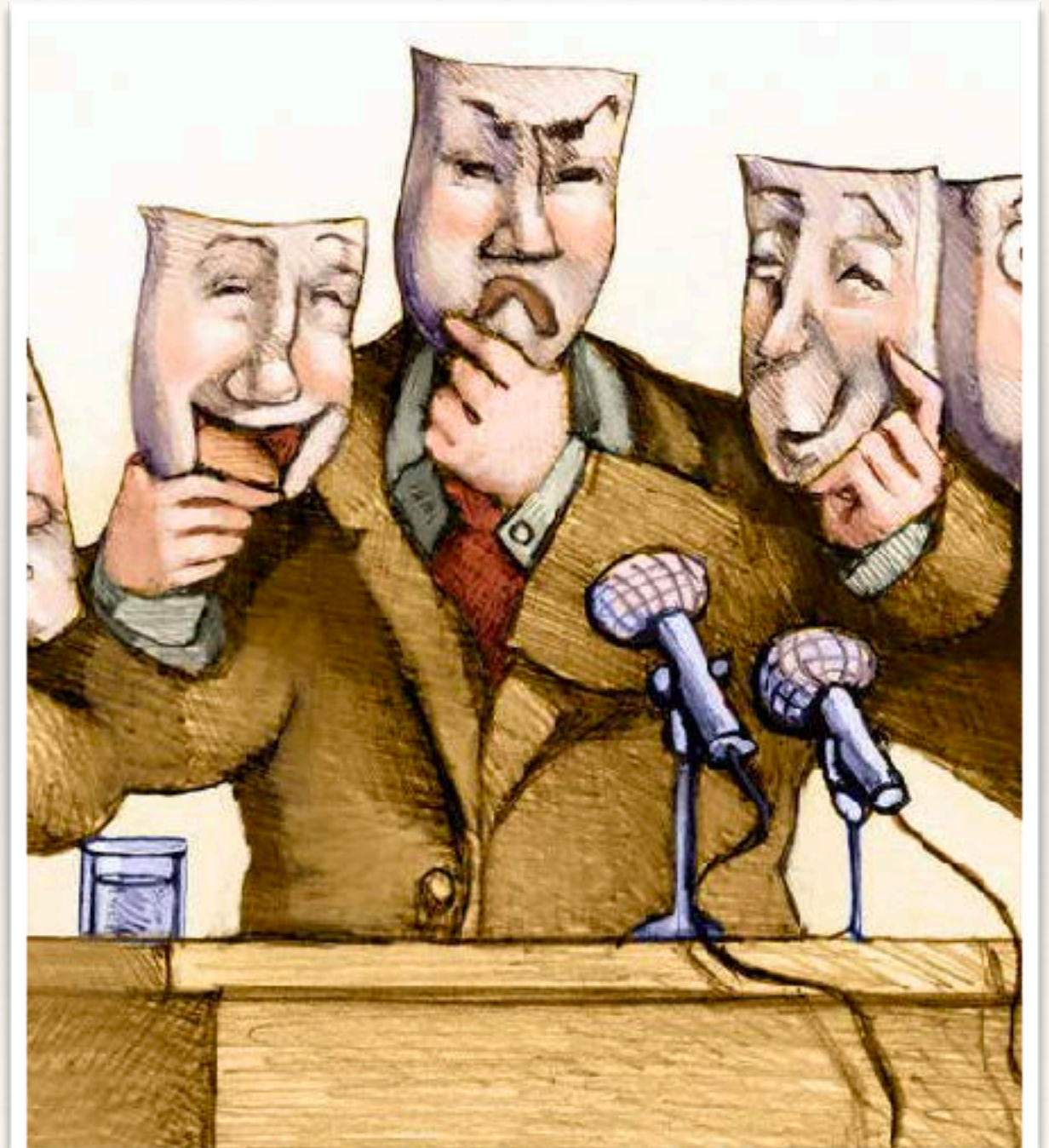
General Information and Quotes

- ❖ “King’s prose schemes—that is, his structural devices—are rhythmical, appealing to the reader’s emotions on a level he made only vaguely be aware of.” —Mia Klein
- ❖ King uses rhetorical devices in his writing to elevate the discussion and enhance its power over the audience.
- ❖ One of his unique gifts as a rhetor was his ability to layer devices on top of each other.



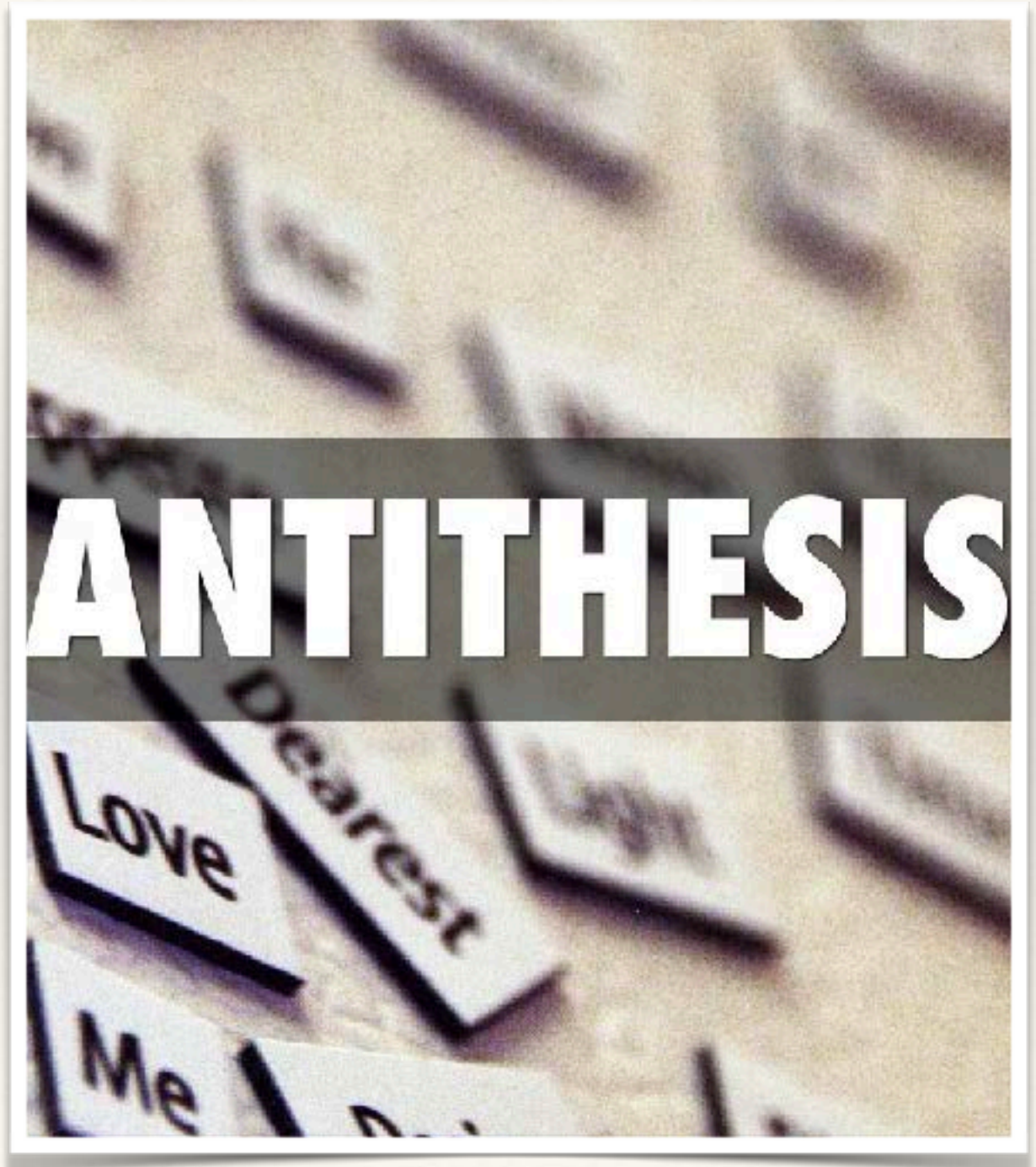
LOGOS/PATHOS/ETHOS/KAIROS

- ❖ **Logos** refers to the use of logic, reasoning and evidence.
- ❖ **Pathos** refers to emotional appeals. It is both the emotions the text generates and the beauty of the text itself.
- ❖ **Ethos** refers to the credibility of the speaker.
- ❖ **Kairos** refers to the correct use of timing. It is both the historical context and the timing of a line used in the text.



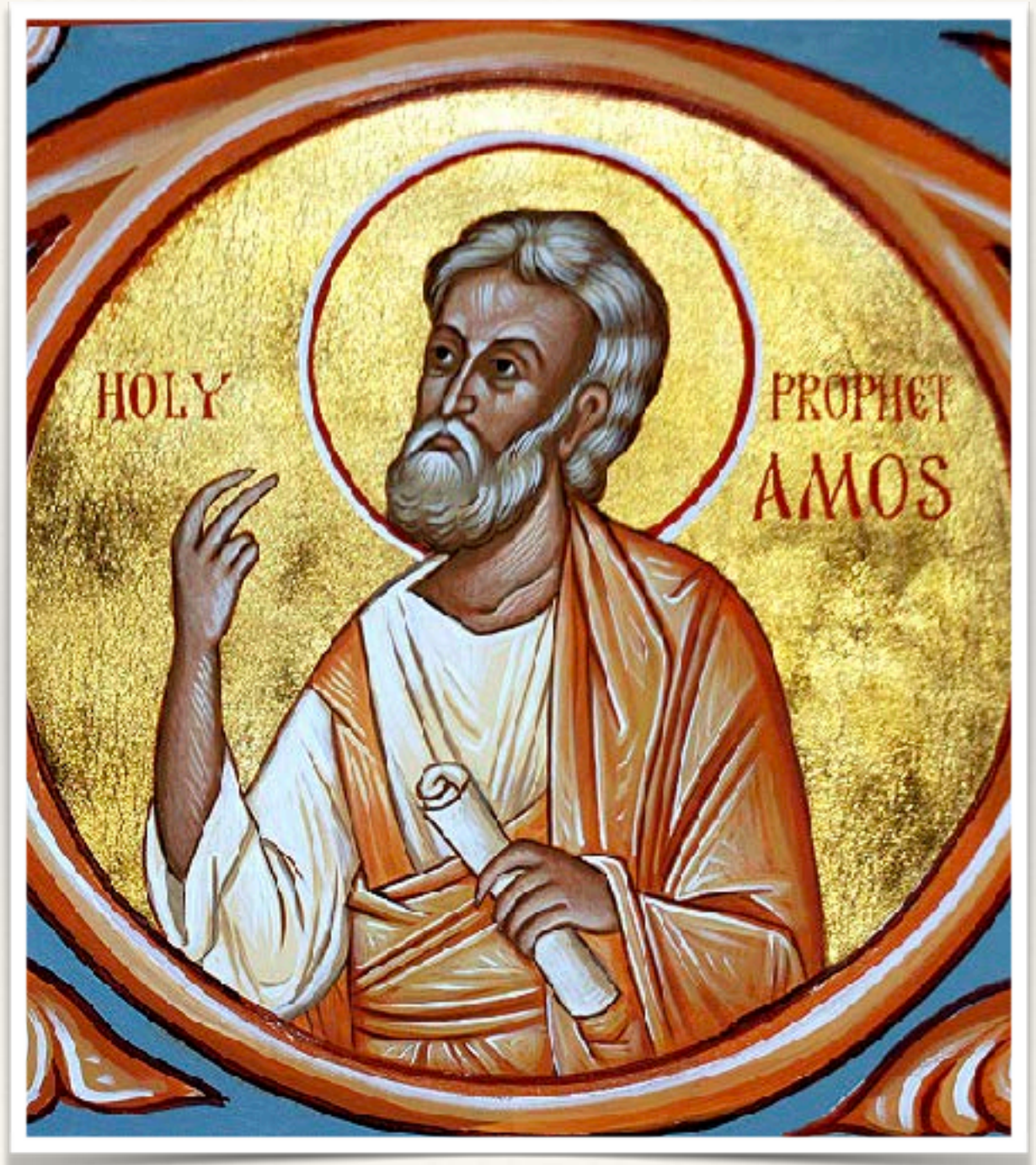
ANTITHESIS

- ❖ **Definition:** Antithesis is the use of contrary ideas expressed in a balanced sentence. It is the juxtaposition of two words, phrases, clauses, or sentences contrasted or opposed in meaning in such a way as to give emphasis to their contrasting ideas and give the effect of balance. There are 30+ in the letter.
- ❖ **Example:** "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."



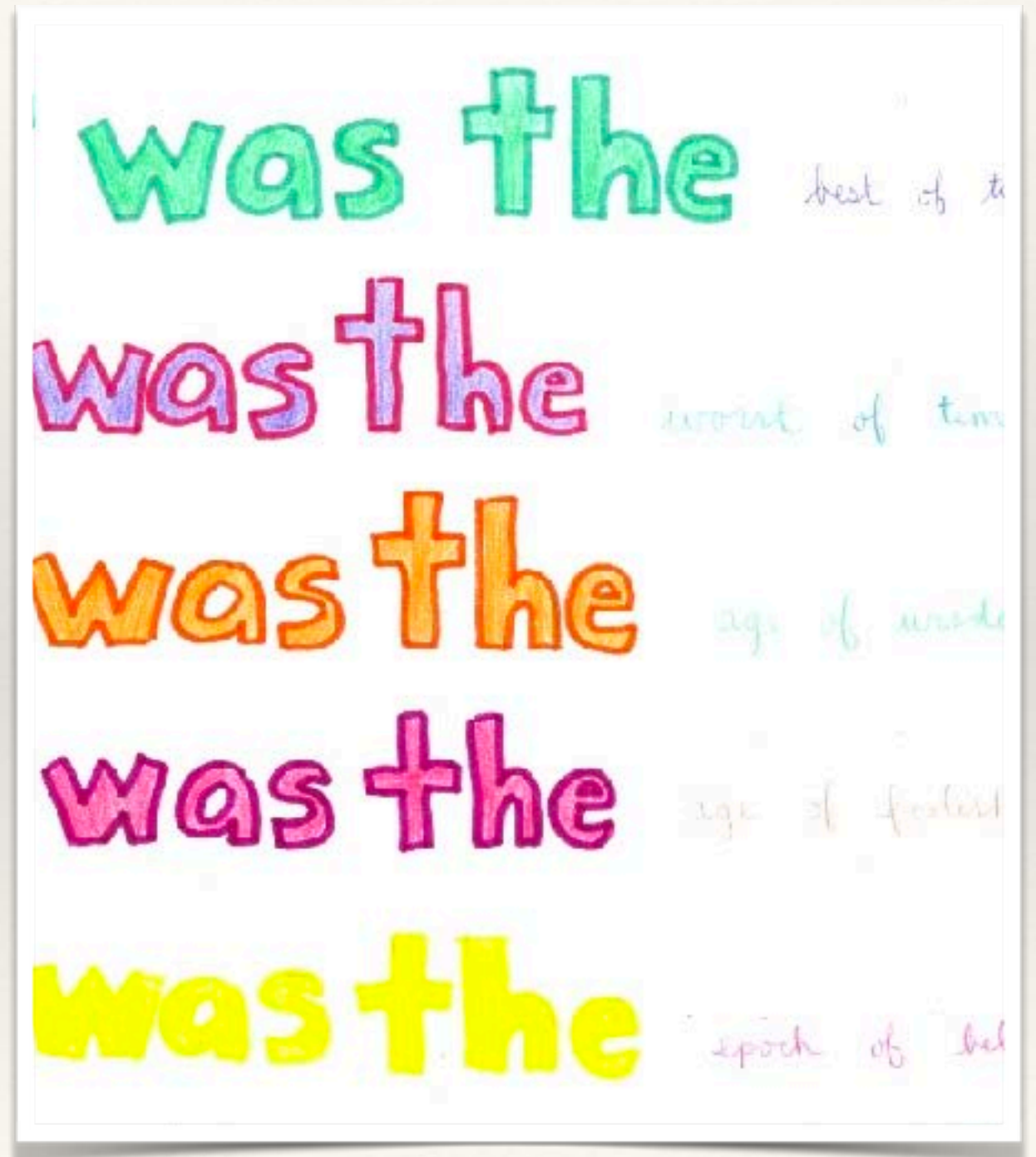
ALLUSIONS

- ❖ **Definition:** a brief and indirect reference to a person, place, thing or idea of historical, cultural, literary or political significance. It does not describe in detail the person or thing to which it refers.
- ❖ There are more 30 “educated” allusions in the text, ranging from Greek philosophers to Christian history.



ANAPHORA

- ❖ **Definition:** Anaphora occurs when the speaker repeats the same words at the start of successive sentences or clauses. There are 12+ in the letter.
- ❖ **Example:** “I had hoped...” (paragraph 26)



EPISTROPHE

- ❖ **Definition:** Epistrophe occurs when the speaker repeats the same words at the end of successive sentences or clauses.
- ❖ **Example:** “Before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched across the pages of history the mighty words of the Declaration of Independence, we were here.”

EPISTROPHE:

The repetition of a word at the end of each phrase or clause.

“I swear to tell the *truth*, the whole *truth*, and nothing but the *truth*.”



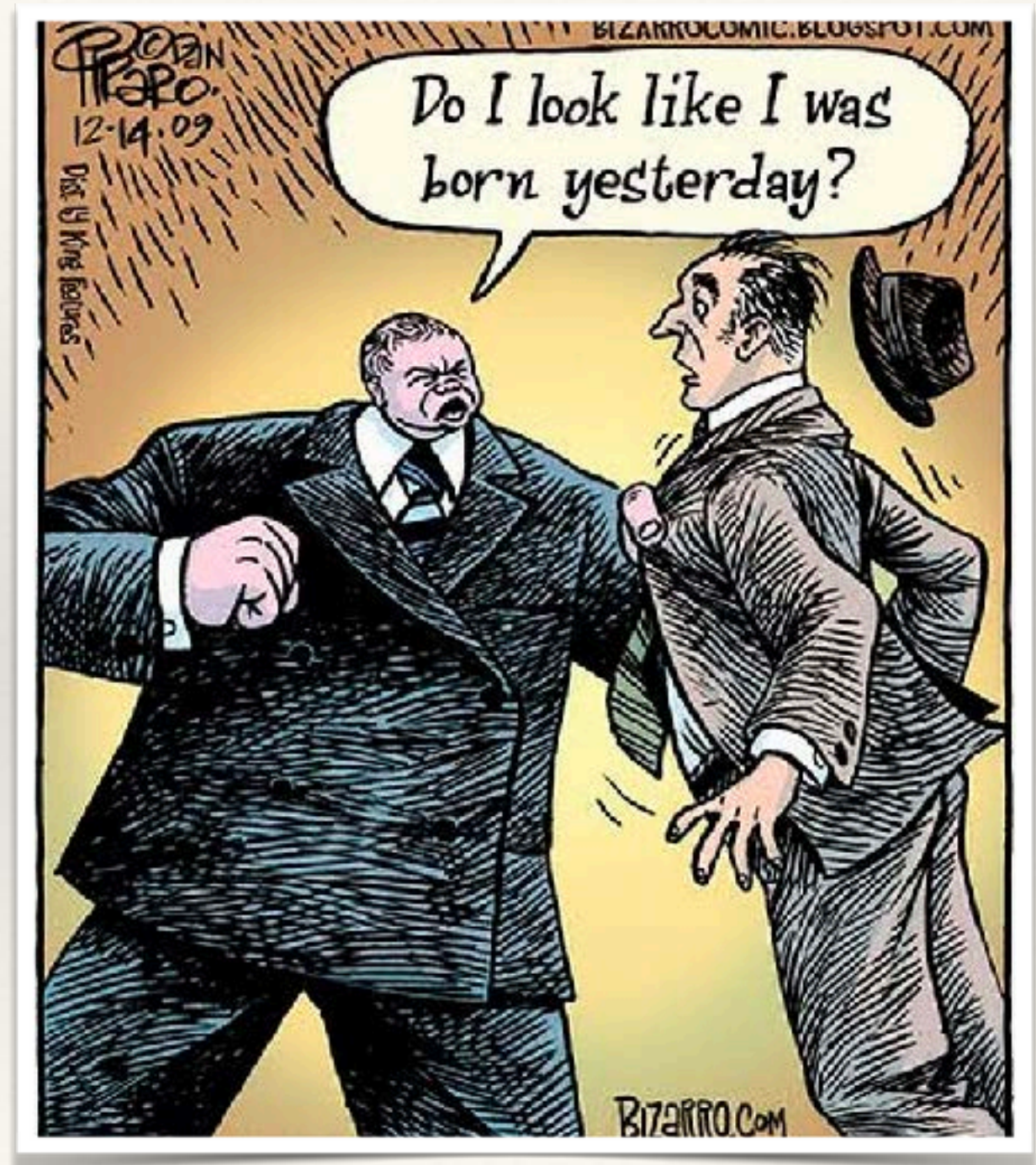
POLYSYNDETON

- ❖ **Definition:** Polysyndeton is the repeated use of conjunctions.
- ❖ **Example:** “But when you have seen...and..” (paragraph 11)



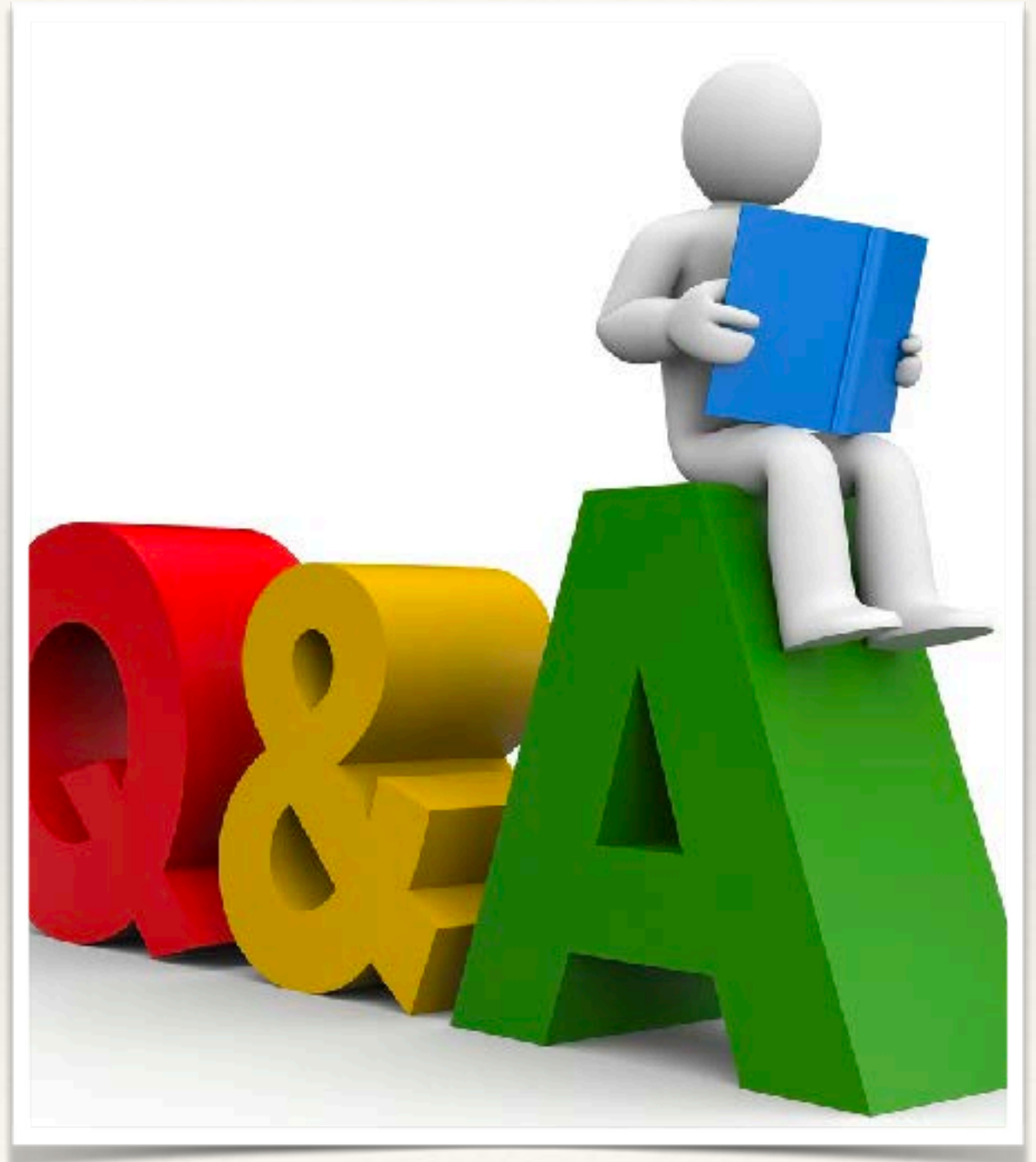
RHETORICAL QUESTION

- ❖ **Definition:** A rhetorical question occurs when a speaker raises a question without expecting or providing an answer.
- ❖ **Example:**



HYPOPHORA

- ❖ **Definition:** Hypophora occurs when the speaker asks a question and then answers it. It heightens interest by creating suspense, supplies a motive for offering the answer, creates involvement with the listener, creates empathy and a sense of dealing with the audience openly, and preempts a more forceful objection.
- ❖ **Example:** “How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust?” (paragraph 12)



SIGNIFYING/DOZENS

- ❖ **Definition:** the “verbal art of ritualized insult,” writes sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman, in her book, *Black Talk* (1994). When one signifies in the black sense of the word, the person puts down, needles, or talks about (signifies on) someone, to make a point or sometimes just for fun. It exploits the unexpected, using quick verbal surprises and humor, and it is generally characterized by non-malicious and principled criticism.
- ❖ **Example:** “...remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.”

IT'S A LOT OF
SOUND AND FURY
SIGNIFYING
NOTHING.

QUOTEHD.COM

Dave Goldberg

PREDICTING

- ❖ **Definition:** Linked to the prophetic visions of the Bible and the traditions of the anti-slavery movement in the United States, African-American rhetoric is often characterized by broad efforts to predict the future, the arrival of the Promised Land.
- ❖ This rhetoric tends to be soaring and visionary.
- ❖ “...will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty...” (last paragraph)



TONE

- ❖ **Definition:** Tone is the author's attitude towards her subject.
- ❖ Tone is revealed most readily by examination of:
 - ❖ Word Choice
 - ❖ Imagery
 - ❖ Detail
- ❖ In the course of the Letter, King shifts tone multiple times, often within a paragraph.



METAPHOR

- ❖ **Definition:** Metaphor is a figure of speech which makes an implicit, implied or hidden comparison between two things that are unrelated but share some common characteristics.
- ❖ **Dominant metaphors in the Letter include:**
 - ❖ Light/Dark
 - ❖ Disease
 - ❖ Height/Depth
 - ❖ Machines

