

“Letter from Birmingham Jail” and United Mission

**Rev. Dr. Ron Vallet, Ambassador for American Baptist United Mission
May 2013**

When we are united in God’s mission, our United Mission will grow.

Fifty years ago, on Good Friday, April 12, Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested and placed in jail for demonstrating on the streets of Birmingham, Alabama.

Shortly afterwards, eight of Alabama’s prominent religious leaders published a statement titled “Call for Unity” that attacked the civil rights campaign in the city as “unwise and untimely.” The clergymen praised law enforcement officials and appealed to “both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.” They attacked King’s “extreme” protest methods.

When a copy of the newspaper was smuggled into King’s jail cell, he began to write a reply in the margins of the newspaper, and later on other paper smuggled into the cell. The result of his writing was the document that we know today as “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Robert Westbrook described the letter as being “a powerful indictment of the shortcoming of timid moderation in the face of injustice, a sermon of chastisement—a shrewd, tough-minded, even militant political document.” In my mind, King’s letter is one of the great writings of the 20th century. Indeed, it has been compared to Lincoln’s Gettysburg address and to Emile Zola’s “J’Accuse.” King swung between a diplomatic mode of address and that of the prophet.

On May 10, with King still in jail, the Ku Klux Klan bombed the home of King’s brother, A. D. King, and blew up the Gaston Hotel, which King and the SCLC had made their headquarters. On June 11, President Kennedy gave a major speech, including these words: “The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them. . . . Who among us would then be content with counsels of patience and delay?” His speech was the launching point for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed into law by President Johnson.

The night of Kennedy’s speech, Medgar Evers, the president of the Mississippi NAACP, was gunned down in his driveway. Three months later, in Birmingham, the Klan bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church from which the May demonstrations had been launched. Four little girls were killed.

In February 1968, only two months before his assassination, King returned to Montgomery where his leadership in the struggle for freedom had begun following the arrest of Rosa Parks and the ensuing bus boycott. In a mass meeting, he reminisced about the struggles in

Birmingham and the battle with Police Chief Bull Connor: “And then ol’ Bull would say as we kept moving, ‘Turn on the fire hoses,’ and they did turn ’em on. But what they didn’t know was that we had a fire that no water could put out.”

To know a bit about the nature of Birmingham 50 years ago, it is helpful to remember that King described it as “the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States.” For example, not only were libraries segregated, but books containing images of black rabbits and white rabbits on the same page were banned from the shelves.

The prophet Micah (6:8) in the eighth century B.C. wrote what God requires: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Eight centuries later, after Jesus was baptized, and then faced temptation in the wilderness, he began his ministry. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read these words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (See Luke 4:18-19.) These words resonated with the words of Micah, who had been a contemporary of Isaiah.

An ongoing commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ leads towards justice and will allow all of God’s children to be at peace.

Today American Baptists minister in the name of Jesus throughout the world—the United States and many other countries. ABCUSA (Office of the General Secretary), American Baptist International Ministries, the American Baptist Home Mission Societies, and American Baptist Regions carry out ministries that seek justice and release from the evils found in all parts of the world. Our giving to American Baptist **United Mission** provides financial resources that make these ministries possible.

When we support American Baptist United Mission, ABC ministries in the United States and around the globe come alive

Your gift for United Mission is always cause for celebration.
Good news for all people!

THANK YOU for your support of American Baptist United Mission!

Ron