

When MLK responded to an "all lives matter" argument

By [Eric A. Weed](#)

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As conversations on racism and the rights of those living in the U.S. take center stage, the nation is deeply divided on the ways in which our moral codes direct us. This is made most plain in the various reactions to the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Politicians seeking to walk the tightrope of race relations continue to increase the notoriety of another idea—that "all lives matter."

At first glance, "all lives matter" may seem like an appropriate response to the issues surrounding racism in the U.S. It means seeing everyone as equals and treating them this way. It is theologically correct in relationship to the *imago dei*. But do temporal authorities bear the fruit of this theology?

Fifty-two years ago, eight white clergy penned their version of "all lives matter." These white men of God questioned the efficacy of the civil rights movement in their hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. They wrote that "honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts" and continued by saying that they "recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized." Their conclusion:

We further strongly urge our own negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations... When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.

The eight white clergy called upon the citizens of Birmingham to stand together to ensure that all people's rights were protected. The theological underpinnings of the argument may be noble, but it denies the realities of these men's particular time and space, in which the fabric of society was constructed and maintained based on a false notion of equality.

History remembers that Martin Luther King Jr. wrote “Letter from Birmingham Jail”—and especially the words “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”—in response to his fellow clergy. White people would do well to remember as well the eight white clergy who argued for restraint in a time of political, religious, and social upheaval. Look at “all lives matter” in light of this statement by these men, and its meaning is realigned. While the theological sentiment rings true, our beliefs are not held in a vacuum. The unfortunate reality of “all lives matter” is that it seeks to maintain the status quo. The white clergy of Birmingham sought to understand the time in which they lived, but they forgot the space they occupied. The realities of the Jim Crow South made it impossible to live out the myth of equality.

A half-century later, the beliefs that undergird “all lives matter” do not account for the temporal realities that bear a strange fruit. When it denies the systemic injustices of housing segregation, mass incarceration, and police brutality, “all lives matter” is just words. To claim equality in light of injustice is to deny the very principle that all lives matter.

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