



# Essay Contest Document

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**Do not change the font or the size.**

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**Grade:** 8th

**Title of Essay:** Love or Law? Interpreting the Purpose of Non-Violent Protest

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a strong supporter of the idea that society can change through the power of love. But what if love is not enough? King emphasized staying nonviolent and steadfast even in the face of oppression and violence. His words and teachings have inspired generations of changemakers and advocates for justice. However, other thinkers recognized that human beings are imperfect and that change sometimes requires legal challenge. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr believed that coercive power was occasionally necessary to achieve lasting peace and justice. To fully embrace Dr. King's work, the King Center's curriculum should include both Agape Love and Christian Realism. Lasting peace and justice require a combination of both approaches to address social issues effectively.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. focused on effecting change through nonviolent protest, particularly by advocating love for one's enemies. His conception of love exceeds that of a friend or family member. He described this "Agape" love as "purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is the love of God operating in the human heart" (Papers 6:325). Loving your enemy can be seen as the first step in transforming a society. King's goal was the Beloved Community: a community that is cared for, just, and free from hatred. He believed this could only be achieved when all people shared love. According to the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, "This type of love is essential for fostering a community of peace and justice, as it helps to disarm opponents and shield oneself from harm."

Although King believed love was the key to building the Beloved Community, Niebuhr recognized another important factor on the path to justice: legal force. The same Stanford article explains that Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr's theology of Christian Realism "is a persistent reminder of the reality of sin on every level of man's existence," meaning that human beings often do wrong and are naturally sinful. Therefore, more than mere sympathy is required for marginalized groups to receive equal treatment and respect. A prime example of Christian Realism is the challenge to legal norms, such as segregated educational opportunities. Landmark cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* made national news and set new legal precedents, but local Paducah citizens were equally integral in fighting for equality. Civil rights activist Curlee Brown Sr. served as president of Paducah's NAACP chapter for more than 30 years and directly challenged the inequality at Paducah Junior College (now West Kentucky Community and Technical College). In the 1950s, he launched a legal case against the institution when he got rejected due to racial segregation, which resulted in the school's integration. Brown was not protesting through love, but through direct legal action. Without the utilization of the court system, Brown's effort might not have been recognized.

Both Agape Love and Christian Realism offer valuable tools for nonviolent protest. Agape Love can transform the oppressor's heart, but it may fall short when attempting to change an unjust system or government. Christian Realism recognizes the human tendency toward "collective evil" and the need for legal pressure in confronting powerful institutions. However, it may feel forced and leave some people resistant to change. To fulfill Dr. King's vision, the King Center's curriculum should combine Agape Love and Christian Realism in its teachings on nonviolence. Only by using both approaches can society move closer to achieving true peace and justice.

### ***DECLARATION OF OWN WORK***

***I affirm that this is my original work. Any material taken from other sources is referenced in the essay above. All sources used in the preparation of this essay have been listed in a bibliography.***

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