Green=Evidence

Yellow=Analysis of Evidence

Dr. King makes his audience feel shame about not living up to both their religious and moral obligations to the movement. By invoking the biblical doctrines of Christianity and Judaism, the rhetoric of the letter makes the audience feel as though they are failing to live according to their faith. He begins to do this in the second paragraph of the letter. There Dr. King connects himself with Christianity by revealing that he is the president of the SCLC and affiliated with the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Such connections are important because they remind his reader that he shares their faith. He compares his plight to that of the Apostle Paul, noting “Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid” (King 1). He also makes an analogy of his plight to that of Jesus. When addressing accusations that he is an extremist, he asks “ Was not Jesus an extremist in love?” (King 4). With these two analogies, Dr. King aligns the Civil Rights Movement with the persecution of Jesus and the goals of St. Paul. For a religious audience, such an alignment would cause them to question any reservations that they have about the movement. Therefore, it is implicit that people who disagree with Dr. King’s goals and methods are not living according to their faith.

Another powerful rhetorical device in the speech is the references to religious philosophers and his articulation of his disappointment in the religious community. Dr. King references St. Thomas Aquinas and Martin Burber strategically. Because these philosophers might not be as familiar to the everyday Christian or Jew, Dr. King uses them to demonstrate his knowledge of complex religious doctrines, thus placing himself in a superior position. These references further emphasize the illegitimacy of asking people who seek basic civil rights to wait. If educated philosophers share his argument that injustice of any kind is a moral failing, then his audience might question their view of the Civil Rights Movement and feel ashamed of their failure to support the movement. Perhaps the most significant rhetorical device that is intended to cause shame is his expression of “disappointment” in the white middle class community. He devotes the last two pages of the letter to explaining his disappointment. To be able to express disappointment suggests that he and his beliefs are morally superior. Therefore, his expression of disappointment is a form of chastisement that emphasizes that any position against his position is not in keeping with religious doctrine and should cause shame.

Dr. King uses secular rhetorical tools as well. For example, he counters claims that he is breaking laws by reminding his audience that Hitler’s behavior was legal, though immoral. The comparison to Hitler is effective because just twenty years after the end of WWII, Americans see Hitler as the ultimate example of evil. Therefore, the audience would be horrified to be in any way to compared to him. The Hitler comparison makes the audience feel shame that they are more interested in what is legal than in what is morally right. Finally, the rhetoric engenders shame in the inability to live up to the standards of our nation. Dr. King references America’s founding fathers. He explains that “We [African Americans] will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands” (5). This is significant because it reminds the audience that a desire to disenfranchise African Americans and the call for African Americans to accept gradual enfranchisement is contrary to the principles upon which this nation was founded, as well as contrary to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus, Dr. King uses religious and secular tools to invoke shame in his audience.