

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Social Gospel

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After centuries of slavery and then racial division, America in the twentieth century desperately needed a racial reckoning, which came in the form of the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., a young minister and theologian, rose to a position of power and influence to lead this movement, tackling the issue of racism through tactics that did not enjoy universal support, but proved to be incredibly effective. The most significant influence and motivation that shaped Dr. King's beliefs and actions stemmed from his own religion and faith in something greater. This theological base directed Dr. King as he developed the nonviolent direct-action tactics that shaped the Civil Rights Movement and began to chip away at racism and white supremacy.

Dr. King and his religiously influenced tactics to fight racism challenged a long history of racial division in the South. Slavery, one of the most exploitive and dehumanizing forms of economic gain, developed in the US into a race-based institution that relied on racial discrimination to justify its existence. Even after the passage of the 13th Amendment ended this dark institution, it left lingering effects including the dehumanization of an entire race of people. This ideology of white supremacy lengthened and justified slavery, and later entrenched the Jim Crow system of racial discrimination as well, Jim Crow proved even harder to get rid of than slavery itself, leading to the systematic racism that required forces such as the Civil Rights Movement to take it down.¹

Ironically, the racism that flourished in the US developed right alongside the great revivals of Christianity, a religion that primarily instructs its followers to love their neighbors. Evangelical Protestantism succeeded particularly well in the south, despite being countercultural with its acceptance of all, including enslaved Americans. Many Christian abolitionists even arose from this group and placed tension on Christian slave owners, spreading the then radical belief that dehumanizing someone because of their color was immoral and sinful, and that slaves were brothers and sisters in Christ. Enslavers in turn searched for a defense for their actions. Their main argument claimed that abolitions had a simple "misinterpretation" of what the Bible was saying, and there was nothing immoral or ungodly at all about keeping slaves.² Despite the weakness of their arguments, to continue their growth, some Evangelicals would have to abandon their abolitionist mindset and merge with the already established white southern culture.³ Even following the abolition of slavery, these white churches in the South stayed primarily segregated and still based their theology on these justifications of slavery and racial division. The idea that African Americans were not worthy of worshipping and learning about the same God as whites provides robust evidence of how deep white supremacy was weaved into society.⁴

The Civil Rights Movement ultimately developed to challenge white supremacy and remove these great immoralities occurring all throughout the United States. The vast mistreatment of African

¹ "Religion and the US South," *Southern Spaces*, last updated Fall 2015, <https://southernspaces.org/2004/religion-and-us-south/>.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967), 72-73.

³ Nathan Andersen, "Slave Systems of the Old Testament and the American South: A Study in Contrasts," *Studia Antiqua* 3, no. 1 (2003): 63.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1146&context=studiesantiqua>

⁴ "Religion and the US South"

Americans had reached a level that required special attention and action. Montgomery, Alabama, the first capital of the confederacy with a long legacy of institutional slavery, and longtime endorsement of Jim Crow, became a hotspot and breeding ground for white supremacists, but also contained a large and wearied, but determined African American population.⁵ With the arrest of Rosa Parks after refusing to give up her bus seat in 1955 to a white man, the city was on fire for change. The Montgomery Bus Boycott drew nationwide attention to the harm of segregation. Looking for a passionate and determined leader, Montgomery leaders landed on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A fairly new arrival from Atlanta ministering at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Dr. King's popularity had quickly grown.⁶ His methods did not encourage African Americans to treat their enemies with violence, but instead expanded the tradition and philosophy of nonviolent direct action in the Black community. In fact, his speeches not only discouraged violent responses but also encouraged African Americans to love their enemies. Even after the bombing of his home, Dr. King's efforts to remain nonviolent were unwavering. Dr. King's early success with the Montgomery Bus Boycott exemplified the effectiveness of his philosophy when the Supreme Court affirmed in the *Browder v. Gayle* decision that segregation bus laws were unconstitutional.⁷ This Civil Rights battle firmly placed Dr. King on his pathway as a nationally known Civil Rights leader.

Dr. King's background helped him develop his later tactics and beliefs. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, Martin Luther King, Jr. followed his father and grandfather into a career in ministry. During his education in Sociology at Morehouse College, he encountered professor and social gospel activist, Benjamin Mays.⁸ Mays was responsible for providing much of Dr. King's knowledge on Civil Rights issues and understanding of tactics that allowed activists to pursue change in way that aligned with Christian values. He continued his education at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania where he further developed his knowledge and faith in this active and practical form of Christianity. While pursuing his masters, Martin developed the mission behind his ministry, "The Gospel I Will Preach to the World." The social gospel, as it was more commonly known, was the true structure of this faith that Dr. King developed. It was practical Christianity, activism modeled primarily after the early church with the aim of correcting social injustices in society. Taking on the role of a social gospel activist he insisted on working towards a warless world with a better distribution of wealth and friendship that transcended race and color. He focused not only on spiritual well-being but also on material well-being, and strongly believed that social problems were moral problems as well, including Civil Rights issues.⁹ These ideas, beliefs, and tactics continued to develop as he simultaneously attended Boston College for his doctorate and then accepted his first position as pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery at the age of 25.¹⁰

⁵ Troy Jackson, *Becoming King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Making of a National Leader* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 53-83.

⁶ Jackson, *Becoming King*, 85-94.

⁷ Civil Rights History Project Collection, Archive of Folk Culture (Washington D.C.: American Folklife Center).

⁸ "Martin Luther King, Jr.," Britannica, last modified September 2, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Martin-Luther-King-Jr>

⁹ "Social Gospel," The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute (Stanford University, June 5, 2018), <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/social-gospel>.

¹⁰ Jackson, *Becoming King*, 35-36.

Dr. King's speeches and sermons demonstrated the fundamental virtues that informed his beliefs and Civil Rights Movement tactics. One of these key virtues is love. During his time at Crozer and Boston College, Dr. King spent much of his studying and writing on the definition of love. He discovered that there were three definitions of love given by the Greeks: eros, philia, and agape. Eros is love that is romantic, philia is friendship love, and agape is love that is unconditional and is not given for the return of anything. This agape love is the love that God the Father has for his children, and it is an irredeemable love that surpasses all understanding. This is the love that Dr. King repeatedly urged his followers to hold towards those that they encountered who were against them. He acknowledged the fact that it makes little sense to try and like these people but argued that African Americans can do so much more by simply loving them with Agape love, Christ's love living inside them. For many people, this idea seemed alarmingly contrary to human nature, but while Dr. King's ideas seemed radical and countercultural to some to him, they expressed the true meaning of the Gospel, while also offering the best, and most moral opportunity for societal change.¹¹

Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, King frequently returned to this idea of changing society through radical love. Celebrating the second anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision on desegregation, Dr. King delivered a sermon titled "Death of Evil Upon the Seashore." In this message he clearly expressed his views on countering the white oppressors through love:

Let us not despair. Let us not lose faith in man and certainly not in God. We must believe that a prejudiced mind can be changed, and that man, by the grace of God, can be lifted from the valley of hate to the high mountain of love. Let us remember that as we struggle against Egypt, we must have love, compassion and understanding goodwill for those against whom we struggle, helping them to realize that as we seek to defeat the evils of Egypt, we are not seeking to defeat them but to help them, as well as ourselves.¹²

Throughout this entire sermon, Dr. King encouraged his followers that the battle they faced was against good and evil, and that good will always triumph. King encouraged his followers to continue to have faith in man and in God, because of this idea of love prejudiced-minded people can truly be changed. This idea remained constant in all of Dr. King's actions, and his philosophy of nonviolence developed as a direct result of this belief in love.

Dr. King imagined nonviolence to be possible and effective through this idea of Agape love. Dr. King strongly rejected violence, instead lingering heavily on the Biblical message of "turn the other cheek," which he deeply tied to the Agape love and loving without anything in return. In his book "Where Do We Go from Here?" Dr. King insisted that violence was the "antithesis of creativity and wholeness." He argued that violence intensified fears of the white people and left them feeling less guilty about their prejudice. He consistently argued that by being violent, the oppressed also become bitter like their oppressor.¹³ As seen in his "I Have a Dream" speech, in which Dr. King encouraged those listening not to "satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from

¹¹ John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 8-9.

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, JR.* Vol. 3, *Birth of a New Age, 1955-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 261.

¹³ King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* 61.

the cup of bitterness and hatred.” Nonviolence then became the most successful option for change.¹⁴

While Dr. King’s faith in the success of nonviolence stemmed from other sources such as Gandhi, Christianity remained the heart of his faith in nonviolence. Reminding his followers of the scripture Matthew 26:52, he insisted that “living by the sword you will perish by the sword.” To Dr. King, participating and reacting with violence only in the end resulted in death by violence. Again, Dr. King kept with his social gospel and his envisioning of a warless world. Violence was not the answer.¹⁵

Dr. King, with the use of nonviolent resistance based on his faith, was incredibly successful in his efforts for the Civil Rights Movement. The Montgomery Bus Boycott represents one of the first large-scale successes based on protestors' use of nonviolence, in part because some Christian whites found it harder to oppress a group of people who were so adamantly living Christ-like lives, and who even in their efforts for change were able to grip tightly to the idea of nonviolence and treat their oppressors with love.

In addition to love, justice was another important theme that Dr. King concentrated on for his cause. To Dr. King, white men were not the problem but were instead part of a larger battle between injustice and justice, evil and good forces. In his letter from a Birmingham jail, Dr. King utters the famous quote that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Through this letter, he made it adamantly clear that injustice was occurring. Defending his breaking of the law, Dr. King insisted that any law that is not of the law of God is an “unjust law.” He went on to define what an unjust law is, in his definition, he states that “any law that degrades human personality is an unjust law.”¹⁶ Dr. King believed that God’s law was just and therefore the laws that existed in America that contradicted that were to be defeated. He strongly believed that a victory in the Civil Rights Movement was a victory for justice in the law.

Dr. King was also an American at heart and relied heavily on his faith in democracy, as well as his belief in love and justice.¹⁷ He repeatedly urged his followers to trust that justice will prevail in a democracy. In one of his addresses to the Montgomery Improvement Association, he repeatedly urged his followers on this conviction, “We are here also because of our love for democracy, because of our deep-seated belief that democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government on earth.” He believed that change must go in a written law to be lasting. These practical tactics, such as nonviolence and changing laws brought together his Christian beliefs in love, justice, and democracy. In his first major speech at Holt Creek Baptist Church for the MIA, Dr. King ties these concepts together, encouraging the attendees to understand that “Justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love.”¹⁸ His mission never failed to embody his core beliefs about the Christian idea of love.

¹⁴ Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, eds., *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King* (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 43.

¹⁵ King, *The Papers*, 305.

¹⁶ “Susi Letter from Birmingham Jail - Home – CSU, Chico,” Letter from Birmingham Jail (The Atlantic Monthly), accessed March 30, 2022, https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf.

¹⁷ King, *The Papers*, 200.

¹⁸ King, *The Papers*, 71-79.

While King's values of love, justice, and democracy shaped his actions, his foundation in Christianity most clearly emerges in his dependency on divine intervention for his mission. To King, his cause was not just his cause, but it was a divine one, in which he believed God was intervening in. On one occasion he spoke about his lack of strength after being arrested during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He was honest about how depleted and afraid he felt, but then he recalled his prayer's immediate effect, explaining that "I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before."¹⁹ This personal revelation convinced King that God was using him for this movement. Much of his belief and strength thus came from the idea that this movement was God-ordained, and the Divine was intervening. During one of his addresses to the MIA Dr. King furthermore assures listeners of this divine intervention, "this is a spiritual movement, and we are depending on moral and spiritual forces. That is the only weapon we have."²⁰ King had no doubt that God was with this movement, a belief that resulted in his constant encouragement to persevere with the foundation rooted in Biblical truth.

As the movement persisted Dr. King faced opposition from both sides for his approach to an unchanging society. Even with the Civil Rights Movement, more groups began to develop that contradicted King's core beliefs including the Black Power Movement. King recalled times in marches where protestors, after being beaten and oppressed, would react in violence. Dr. King understood the frustration of these activists but urged them to see the long-term effects of what they were doing, and discouraged any ideas of separation into these different movement factions. His vision of unity remained based in his Christian values, even as other parts of the movement evolved in other directions. Some groups like the "Back to Africa Movement" or the "Gospel of Separatism" contradicted parts of King's message, to King not wanting to include white people in the movement defeated the purpose. He believed instead in equality for all and hope for the white man. Acting as if white people were a lost cause was detrimental to the movement all together.²¹ Because of his Christianity, Dr. King continued to strongly believe that white people were redeemable, and the nation would be able to live equally together one day, despite the growth of different views in the larger Civil Rights Movement.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., undoubtedly made an enormous impact on many people and on the Civil Rights Movement. Whether sitting in the sanctuary at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, rallying in the streets of Montgomery, or on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., Dr. King's strong passion undeniably moved and inspired many Americans. While the Civil Rights Movement was not a single man job, King deserves major credit for the impact of his dedication to his mission of the social gospel accompanied with his passionate oratorical skills. He used this to motivate an entire nation to break down years of segregation and unjustified discrimination towards an entire race of people. Dr. King's religion played a powerful role in the impact that he made. Without his faith in divine intervention in the movement, tightly intertwined with his value of Agape, philosophy of nonviolence, and emphasis on justice and freedom, Dr. King might have never been able to move a great population of Christian white southerners to realize their denial of practical Christian values. Dr. King's dismantling of the hold that racism

¹⁹Ansbro, *The Making of a Mind*, 52-53.

²⁰ King, *The Papers*, 200.

²¹ Ansbro, *The Making of a Mind*, 204-205, 220-221.

had on white Christianity was key to breaking down decades of segregation and resulting in an increasingly more inclusive and welcoming South to all.

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