

Martin Luther King, Jr: Some Pastoral and Ecclesial Reflections

by Pastor Rich Lusk

On Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, it's appropriate for Christians to reflect on the meaning and lessons of King's life. Of course, it is next to impossible to sort out the man himself from the aura that has come to surround him. King has become something of a symbol, representing freedom and equality before the law. Obviously, these are ideals that every Christian should support. Many aspects of King's "dream" resonate with us as believers. In King's own words, a man should be judged by the content of his character rather than the color of his skin.

But what happens when we evaluate King himself by that standard? The man himself is a highly ironic, complex, even contradictory figure. On the one hand, some "rightwingers" have attacked King as a Marxist, a theological liberal, a sexual libertine, a Communist, and an academic cheater. Of course, to say anything negative about King today is to run the risk of facing the charge of racism (a ploy that I doubt King himself would approve of), but we also need to deal with the facts of history honestly. On the other hand, King has been hailed as an "American hero" (by Ron Paul), an "evangelical Christian" (by Chuck Colson), and a "Christian martyr" (by many branches of the church). He has been hailed in rock songs (e.g., U2's "Pride") and deemed worthy of a national holiday. His agenda and his lifestyle – as well as his untimely death – made him into a worldwide icon of human rights and civil justice, and rightfully so. What are we to make of the man and movement he led?

I am by no means an expert on King, and may have many things wrong, but I'll share a few thoughts here. It's risky to address such a controversial figure, but I will try my best to be "fair and balanced," as the saying goes.

The first thing to note about King is that he was a pastor. The American civil rights movement was, first and foremost, a church-based, rather than politically-based, movement. The most effective challenge to racism in our culture came from a pastor who used his pen and pulpit to bring an end to unjust forms of segregation. It took a *pastor* to do what *politicians* could not. King's life proves the truth of Herman Melville's dictum: "The pulpit is the prow of culture." Despite King's liberal theological tendencies, one thing that strikes me every time I read something by him is how much his public rhetoric consistently invokes the Scriptures as an authority, challenging systemic racism on a biblical basis. King used biblical language and imagery, calling on his hearers, black and white, to more faithfully put their Christian faith into practice. King called Christians to enact the alternative politics of the gospel. His "I Have Dream Speech" is largely a call for an ethic of *imitatio Christi*, based on the principle that only the love of Christ can reconcile oppressed and oppressors, and bring them together at a shared table as brothers.

King allowed the Bible to shape his own agenda. King refused to allow violence on the part of whites to serve as an excuse for African-American counter-violence. He condemned self-righteousness in his own community, calling for confession and repentance on both sides of the segregation line. He resisted other African-American leaders, who called for violent revolution, saying such a response, however “understandable” would “destroy their own souls” and make them mirror images of their oppressors. He told his followers to love their enemies, as Jesus commanded, even if it meant great suffering. King believed the true social revolution would not come through force, but through charity and forgiveness. In the face of all kinds of opposition and injustice, he said, “We are still determined to use the weapon of love.” And with that weapon, he won the battle of his life.

The media today tends to blame the church and the Bible for bigotry (and everything else that’s gone wrong in our nation’s history), but we should make the counterpoint that King himself did not see it that way. He believed only the Bible’s teaching could save us from our prejudices. He believed the church was the chief agent of cultural change in the world. Note his famous lines from his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”:

There was a time when the church was very powerful -- in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.

In another place, King wrote:

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause men everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace. Men far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight.

King challenged the church to live out her calling. While appreciating all the good things that America had accomplished (King was quite different from the likes of Jeremiah Wright on this score), he called on the church to put allegiance to Christ above all other loyalties. In his rhetorically brilliant “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” using Paul as his mouthpiece, he wrote:

I am impelled to write you concerning the responsibilities laid upon you to live as Christians in the midst of an unChristian world. That is what I had to do. That is what every Christian has to do. But I understand that there are many Christians in America who give their ultimate allegiance to man-made systems and customs. They are afraid to be different. Their great concern is to be accepted socially. They live by some such principle as this: "everybody is doing it, so it must be alright." For so many of you Morality is merely group consensus. In your modern sociological lingo, the mores are accepted as the right ways. You have unconsciously come to believe that right is discovered by taking a sort of Gallup poll of the majority opinion. How many are giving their ultimate allegiance to this way.

But American Christians, I must say to you as I said to the Roman Christians years ago, "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." Or, as I said to the Phillipian Christians, "Ye are a colony of heaven." This means that although you live in the colony of time, your ultimate allegiance is to the empire of eternity. You have a dual citizenry. You live both in time and eternity; both in heaven and earth. Therefore, your ultimate allegiance is not to the government, not to the state, not to nation, not to any man-made institution. The Christian owes his ultimate allegiance to God, and if any earthly institution conflicts with God's will it is your Christian duty to take a stand against it. You must never allow the transitory evanescent demands of man-made institutions to take precedence over the eternal demands of the Almighty God.

Later in King's career, he moved towards politically-based solutions to the problems of race and poverty (more about that below). But much of his life was aimed at getting the church to act like the church. Indeed, King's work shows that we got the "nanny state" only after "mother church" failed to carry out her calling. The modern welfare state is largely the by-product of a failed ecclesiology. America today might look quite different had Bible-believing Christians been more faithful, church-centered, and politically active in those crucial years of the 1950s and 1960s.

King made the unity of the church a priority. Racial segregation was simply an aspect of a much larger scandal in Christendom. In his "Paul's Letter to American Christians," he wrote:

Americans, I must remind you, as I have said to so many others, that the church is the Body of Christ. So when the church is true to its nature it knows neither division nor disunity. But I am disturbed about what you are doing to the Body of Christ. They tell me that in America you have within Protestantism more than two hundred and fifty six denominations. The tragedy is not so much that you have such a multiplicity of denominations, but that most of them are warring against each other with a claim to absolute truth. This narrow sectarianism is destroying the unity of the Body of Christ. You must come to see that God is neither a Baptist

nor a Methodist; He is neither a Presbyterian nor a Episcopalian. God is bigger than all of our denominations. If you are to be true witnesses for Christ, you must come to see that America...

But I must not stop with a criticism of Protestantism. I am disturbed about Roman Catholicism. This church stands before the world with its pomp and power, insisting that it possesses the only truth. It incorporates an arrogance that becomes a dangerous spiritual arrogance. It stands with its noble Pope who somehow rises to the miraculous heights of infallibility when he speaks *ex cathedra*. But I am disturbed about a person or an institution that claims infallibility in this world. I am disturbed about any church that refuses to cooperate with other churches under the pretense that it is the only true church. I must emphasize the fact that God is not a Roman Catholic, and that the boundless sweep of his revelation cannot be limited to the Vatican. Roman Catholicism must do a great deal to mend its ways.

There is another thing that disturbs me to no end about the American church. You have a white church and you have a Negro church. You have allowed segregation to creep into the doors of the church. How can such a division exist in the true Body of Christ? You must face the tragic fact that when you stand at 11:00 on Sunday morning to sing "All Hail the Power of Jesus Name" and "Dear Lord and Father of all Mankind," you stand in the most segregated hour of Christian America. They tell me that there is more integration in the entertaining world and other secular agencies than there is in the Christian church. How appalling that is.

I understand that there are Christians among you who try to justify segregation on the basis of the Bible. They argue that the Negro is inferior by nature because of Noah's curse upon the children of Ham. Oh my friends, this is blasphemy. This is against everything that the Christian religion stands for. I must say to you as I have said to so many Christians before, that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus." Moreover, I must reiterate the words that I uttered on Mars Hill: "God that made the world and all things therein . . . hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth."

In essence, King was fighting a modern version of the "Galatian heresy." Just as Paul's letter to the Galatians challenged Jewish Christians who were segregating themselves from Gentile Christians, so King argued that in Christ, humanity has been reunited.

King challenged both blacks and whites to listen to the Bible, and to take their faith more seriously, not less seriously. Christian faith did not create bigotry, it killed it. King showed prejudiced Christians were contradicting their own creed. Note that he did *not* challenge racism in the name of secularism. Had his message been, "All truth is relative, so people should do what is right in their own eyes when it comes to the race question," nothing would have happened.

Instead, King acted as a biblical absolutist (at least in public rhetoric), appealing regularly to Amos and the Sermon on the Mount. Consider these words from his sermon, "A Knock at Midnight":

It is also midnight within the moral order. At midnight colors lose their distinctiveness and become a sullen shade of grey. Moral principles have lost their distinctiveness. For modern man, absolute right and wrong are a matter of what the majority is doing. Right and wrong are relative to likes and dislikes and the customs of a particular community. We have unconsciously applied Einstein's theory of relativity, which properly described the physical universe, to the moral and ethical realm.

Midnight is the hour when men desperately seek to obey the eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt not get caught." According to the ethic of midnight, the cardinal sin is to be caught and the cardinal virtue is to get by. It is all right to lie, but one must lie with real finesse. It is all right to steal, if one is so dignified that, if caught, the charge becomes embezzlement, not robbery. It is permissible even to hate, if one so dresses his hating in the garments of love that hating appears to be loving. The Darwinian concept of the survival of the fittest has been substituted by a philosophy of the survival of the slickest. This mentality has brought a tragic breakdown of moral standards, and the midnight of moral degeneration deepens....

King did not privatize his Christian faith; he wore it on his sleeve and openly appealed to explicitly biblical principles. *Our nation could never have ended systemic racism apart from a pastor publicly proclaiming the Bible in the civil arena.* Let this fact linger: The civil rights movement was driven by a pastor who wanted to apply the Bible in the public square! King rightly saw the church as the most powerful social institution for bringing about cultural transformation; he rightly believed that social justice could not be found apart from Jesus and his teachings. (You could even say King was an ecclesiocentric theonomist of sorts.)

This is important from an apologetic standpoint. The civil rights movement, at its best, was thoroughly undergirded by the church and the Bible. But today this fact is totally overlooked by most Americans. Many American citizens today, including both Christians and non-Christians, marginalize the church's social role and fear any public use of the Bible at all. It may be fine to use the Bible for developing private morals, but not for defining public justice. King shows us how wrong-headed that is. We cannot expect to have a just society if we reject God and his Word. While many conservative theologians in the centuries previous had tried to use the Bible to justify not merely slavery but racism, King showed that the teaching of the Bible actually demanded something very different. And for that courageous stand, he should be praised and imitated.

What, then, of the man's shortcomings? Virtually all scholars now agree that King had numerous moral failings. He was indeed guilty of plagiarizing, both as an undergraduate and in graduate school. A case could be made that his academic infelicities were due more to sloppiness and overwork than a willful

intent to deceive. He did not hide his plagiarizing very much, and he was certainly intelligent enough to do his own work. But in the end, nothing excuses these academic improprieties. The only question is why his work did not create an academic scandal while he was student. It is a shocking indictment of the system that King got away with so much.

There is also no doubt that King drifted leftward in his theology, though just how been a matter of debate. He was raised in a very theologically conservative context, another Baptist minister in a long line of Baptist ministers. But even as a teenager he shocked Sunday School teachers (not to mention his father!) when he began to question the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the doctrine of original sin. His theological views do not seem to have ever been stable for long, as his mind was continually pulled in a liberal direction by his modernist education, though some have suggested there is evidence that he eventually moved back to more conservative positions as he aged. In 1965, he wrote:

In the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher. This is my being and my heritage for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher, and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher.

Whatever the case, it has to be admitted that King's published writings explicitly questioned or denied all the major tenets of orthodox, historic Christian faith, including the deity and bodily resurrection of Jesus. He explained these things away as "experiences" of the early church rather than revealed doctrines based on historical and ontological facts. Simply put, King's early theological writings are not fully orthodox, and if he did change his mind on these things, he hid it well. To my knowledge, he was never "evangelistic" in the sense of calling men to trust in Christ for eternal redemption. One can search King's writings long and hard and still never find him affirming anything like an orthodox view of salvation. Some have even argued King was at heart a Unitarian, and only operated as Baptist because that was the denomination with the most political potential in the South.

There is a great irony in the fact that King largely adopted a rationalistic, humanistic worldview, for it means King's theology derived not so much from his fathers in the black church, but from white European rationalists. Again, some have argued King participated in the modernist project of trying to conform Christian doctrine to "scientific" criteria solely as a way of appeasing his professors. But it is hard to resist the conclusion that he shook he off the basic orthodoxy of his fathers and essentially ended up as a "liberal Protestant." King appealed to many Christian doctrines, most notably man as the *imago Dei*, and he clearly appreciated Jesus and Paul as moral teachers, but the overall shape of his theology was, at best, a mix of Christian and humanist doctrines. The Christian content, especially his reliance on the words of Jesus, should not be minimized, but King's syncretism is deeply troubling.

I am quite sure the debate over King's theology will continue, but wherever we believe King ended up on the theological spectrum, there is no doubt about his lasting influence. Sadly, King's movement towards liberalism had a very negative impact on the Africa-American church, opening the door wider to unorthodox liberationist theology, which is now dominant. Conservative, orthodox Christians who want to claim King's legacy as their own need to beware of the problems that come with claiming King as "one of us."

Politically, the associations of King with Communism are well known, but hotly debated. I do not think it is fair to classify him as a Communist, though he certainly should be considered a socialist of sorts. Again, we find King to have been something of a mixed bag, mixing Christian convictions with ideas and concepts from other worldviews. King certainly got his notions of civil resistance, human dignity and worth, just laws, and cultural transformation from the Christian tradition. But he combined those doctrines with many sub-biblical liberal views.

King never reconciled in his mind or in his writings the Christian principle of non-violent protest, applying the Sermon on the Mount, with his socialist views, in which government force would ultimately be used to redistribute wealth and end poverty. On the one hand, King espoused a non-violent plan for cultural transformation, and openly critiqued Marxism's pragmatic ethic. King's gave a nuanced, appreciative assessment of American capitalism, while flatly denouncing Communism:

Through this economic system [of American Capitalism] you have been able to do wonders. You have become the richest nation in the world, and you have built up the greatest system of production that history has ever known. All of this is marvelous. But Americans, there is the danger that you will misuse your Capitalism....It can cause one to live a life of gross materialism. I am afraid that many among you are more concerned about making a living than making a life. You are prone to judge the success of your profession by the index of your salary and the size of the wheel base on your automobile, rather than the quality of your service to humanity.

The misuse of Capitalism can also lead to tragic exploitation. This has so often happened in your nation....If you are to be a truly Christian nation you must solve this problem. You cannot solve the problem by turning to communism, for communism is based on an ethical relativism and a metaphysical materialism that no Christian can accept.

Note that King blames economic injustices not on capitalism per se, but on its misuse and abuse. He seemed quite favorable to a market economy, though he obviously wanted racial equality to be enforced to "level the playing field."

At the same time, it must be admitted that King came to expect more from the state than it could ever deliver. He allowed personal rights to be severed from responsibilities, giving birth to a culture of entitlement. King began to demand

more from the state than equality before the law for both blacks and whites; the state was to become an agent of redemption and an engine of social renewal. In the end, he seems to have fallen into the typical liberal problem of looking for salvation through politics.

At times, King suggested that the political reallocation of resources could “wipe poverty from the face of the earth.” Of course, no economic system can do that because poverty is as at least much a problem of culture and lifestyle (and ultimately spirituality) as economics. For King, as for many Americans in the 1960s, the basic point of civil government shifted from justice and defense to social services. He wrote, “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual doom.” The reality is, a nation whose families and churches are in such shambles that the state *needs* to spend huge amounts on social programs is a nation that is *already* in the act of committing suicide.

Sadly, King’s political legacy includes not just love for enemies and non-violent protest, but also the welfare state, which has wreaked great havoc on America’s poor. Because the state can only treat surface level symptoms of poverty, rather than root causes, the state can be, at most, a merciful safety net for people (see Daniel 4:27). It cannot generate true “social uplift,” as King desired. The state can help people manage their poverty, but it cannot help them escape it. This is why recovery of the mercy ministries of the church are so vital. But Christians should be careful in their critique of the welfare state *until and unless* they are ready for the church to begin pulling her weight once again. To do so will require a much higher level of sacrifice than we are presently willing to make (or so it seems to me). It does no good to call on the state to stop showing welfare on a wide scale unless the church is ready to start showing mercy on a commensurate scale.

We cannot overlook the fact that wealth redistribution programs have had all kinds of effects that King neither anticipated nor intended. In the modern welfare state, in the name of compassion, the government ends up subverting the family structure by subsidizing immorality (see 2 Thessalonians 3:9). The state becomes a substitute husband and a surrogate father, contrary to God’s design for a healthy society (see 1 Timothy 5:8). The state’s present-day system can actually make it harder for families and small entrepreneurs to get off the ground. America’s impoverished, dilapidated cities are now rife with the implications of such a misguided program.

King’s marital infidelity has also been well documented. I do not know of any historian who would deny that King was something of a sexual predator. What is not so clear is how repentant (if at all) King was in the aftermath of his promiscuity. Sadly, many other African-American leaders began to use King’s indiscretions to justify their own sexual deviance. His example had a devastating trickle-down effect. At least part of the blame for the near total breakdown of the urban Africa-American family has to be laid at the feet of King.

What are we to make of all this? How are we to assess King? King has left behind a mixed legacy. King shows us the incredible influence of great men, especially

great *churchmen*, for good or for ill in a society. King's positive traits should be celebrated and imitated. King transformed American culture for the better by proclaiming the Bible's teaching on race in the public square. From this standpoint, he is not just an American hero, he is a Christian hero. He reminds us what the church can do when she is faithful, bold, and prophetic. But King also shows that great men can do the greatest damage. The far reaching effects of his liberal tendencies still cripple us in many ways down to this day, in church, family, and state. His private life and theological views leave much to be desired, to say the least.

Like all of us, King was a broken vessel and a crooked stick. But like all of us, God showed through King that he can use even imperfect instruments to further his purposes, as he pleases. The final assessment of King's life must be left to the only Judge who knows our hearts completely.

King's final words before being shot on the balcony of the Lorraine hotel in Memphis were spoken to musician Ben Branch, who was scheduled to perform that night at an event King was attending: "Ben, make sure you play 'Take My Hand, Precious Lord' in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty."

*Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home
When my way grows drear
Precious Lord linger near
When my life is almost gone
Hear my cry, hear my call
Hold my hand lest I fall
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home
When the darkness appears
And the night draws near
And the day is past and gone
At the river I stand
Guide my feet, hold my hand
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home
Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm lone
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home*

This is the Anglican collect for April 4 (the day of King's assassination in 1968):

Almighty God, by the hand of Moses your servant you led your people out of slavery, and made them free at last; Grant that your Church,

following the example of your prophet Martin Luther King, may resist oppression in the name of your love, and may secure for all your children the blessed liberty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

A final, concluding, unscientific postscript: Personally, one thing I have noticed is that King gets so much attention, he overshadows other equally important African-American heroes. These alternative heroes should get their due. For example, I believe a case could be made that Booker T. Washington is one of the four or five greatest Americans to ever live. But how much do people know about him today? Why isn't his life more celebrated by both blacks and whites? Why isn't the amazing story of his Tuskegee Institute given its due in American history books?

Washington's political agenda for the African-American community was quite different from King's in many ways. But he was driven by the same Christ-like love and had in view the same goal of biblically-mandated equality, freedom, and dignity for all persons. Washington, more than King, stressed personal responsibility, thrift, and work ethic. He focused much more on education and self-reliance than King. He did not turn to the state for solutions to what he perceived to be mainly spiritual and moral problems. But like King, he believed community (especially the church, but also the school) was crucial to social transformation, and he wanted African-Americans to be patient and forgiving towards the sins of white racists. Washington's accomplishments on behalf of both blacks and whites are incredible testimony to what a man can do when he works hard, perseveres, keeps his integrity, and strives for excellence. Washington's life is most certainly worthy of honor and emulation. He is certainly more credible as truly *Christian* hero.

Some favorite quotations from Martin Luther King, Jr.:

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into friend.

Never succumb to the temptation of bitterness.

Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'

An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.

An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law.

At the center of non-violence stands the principle of love.

Never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was legal.

All progress is precarious, and the solution of one problem brings us face to face with another problem.

You have allowed the material means by which you live to outdistance the spiritual ends for which you live. You have allowed your mentality to outrun your morality. You have allowed your civilization to outdistance your culture. Through your scientific genius you have made of the world a neighborhood, but through your moral and spiritual genius you have failed to make of it a brotherhood. So America, I would urge you to keep your moral advances abreast with your scientific advances.

A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus.

A man can't ride your back unless it's bent.

A man who won't die for something is not fit to live.

A nation or civilization that continues to produce soft-minded men purchases its own spiritual death on the installment plan.

Almost always, the creative dedicated minority has made the world better.

Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies - or else? The chain reaction of evil - hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars - must be broken, or else we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.... I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood.

I want to be the white man's brother, not his brother-in-law.

If physical death is the price that I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

We are not makers of history. We are made by history.

We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now.

The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But... the good Samaritan reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.

Pity may represent little more than the impersonal concern which prompts the mailing of a check, but true sympathy is the personal concern which demands the giving of one's soul.

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

The moral arc of the universe bends at the elbow of justice.

The hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict.