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*“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”*

## **MARTIN LUTHER KING JR’S EVANGELICAL LIBERALISM: AN APPROACH TO SOCIAL ENTERPRISE**

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“A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr.

Evangelical Christianity has always been a religious movement committed, foremost, to saving the souls of men. However, because there has been a traditional and singular focus on salvation, a gulf has existed between the Church’s conception of personal salvation and the social responsibility necessary for sustained circumstantial and environmental peace so necessary to enhance the experience of personal salvation. Martin Luther King’s theology embraced liberal evangelicalism, which held that a peaceful society and a just society is God’s will for humanity. His belief in personal universality as well as his preaching demonstrated that every person who chose to have a personal relationship with Him through Jesus Christ had the ability to respond to Him and to receive from Him as a result of such relationship.

King was completely responsive to the idea of God's presence in the midst of all human struggles. He had faith in the concept of justice—that its emphatic calls for

freedom, evenhandedness and fair dealing for peoples of the nations would result in God's favor and assistance. King's fair-mindedness was its own blueprint for the broad based coalition he sought intended to forge significant bridges of mutuality between the races. His impassioned preaching liberated the honesty inherent in his desire to create every possible corridor of reason between people of every race and social standing—that effort, if accepted and embraced, would result in social and spiritual good for the entire society. This logic, along with these motivations of Dr. King's shook and in many cases shattered the foundations of America's status quo. If changes did not occur in American institutions right away; at least, he preached to a new moral paradigm that made the status quo much less comfortable in his native country.

At first, his civil rights activities engendered him no accolades. In fact, while he lived, the thrust of his preaching brought mounting criticisms from his fellow theologians in the mainstream. They were his detractors who branded King's activities as communist. This young "Preacher who once appealed to Billy Graham for advice was the first theological thinker since the Social Gospel movement to forge a synthesis of evangelical and liberal traditions in America..."<sup>2</sup> He was trying to level the playing field for disenfranchised blacks and poor workers of every kind. However, when he sought the counsel of Billy Graham, the father of modern evangelicalism, he was affirmed and, indeed, not thought a communist. When King sought Graham's advice on what the future trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement should be, Dr. Graham not only advised him, but offered him friendship, moral and too.

While the themes of social and legal justice are predominant in many sacred texts, persons of faith have long been remiss in not promoting social justice on a broad based

scale, and they have been negligent at best in aiding the worldwide struggle against human injustice. The bleak reality that the church must face is that no theory of justice can adequately or completely address the social, economic, and political needs of a society apart from a moral philosophy and principles of equality, respect and human dignity for all people. King expressed this idea when he said:

Religion must never overlook this, and any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the economic conditions that damn the soul, the social conditions that corrupt men, and the city governments that cripple them, is a dry, dead, do-nothing religion in need of new blood.<sup>3</sup>

If the church does not take up the banner of justice, the moral core, left to any other interest group is missing. This intellectual spectrum of King's personal philosophy can be credited to his academic studies under the guidance of mentors like Edgar Brightman, Walter G. Muelder, and Harold L. DeWolf at Boston University. However, more importantly, King's personal intellectual gamut found its fullest expression in the lived experience of the Civil Rights Movement. The King scholar, Rufus Burrow, Jr., rightly suggests:

King applied the principles of personalism in his efforts to achieve a world community of love in which every person will be treated justly, with dignity and respect. Because his personalism was forged in the heat of the struggle against racism, economic exploitation, and militarism, it invariably developed a texture and look that was noticeably different from that of his teachers and the vast majority of others who wrote and lectured

on it. In this sense we can say that personalism was not only a conceptual framework for King, but a faith and life that he lived in a way and to a degree that others did not.<sup>4</sup>

I would further assert that at the core of King's personal philosophy is the 'Golden Rule' as taught and lived by Jesus Christ; "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." It is either this simple, or this profoundly complex ideology that sparked in King the courage to step to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement.

While King's theory of justice was the synthesis of many theories, his most indispensable theory was rooted in his perception of himself as a human being made worthy of a full life by God and that the world around him was built upon the enduring foundation of God's love. Love was the biblical principle that stitched together the wholesome fabric of "turn the other cheek," "If your enemy compels you to go with him a mile, go with him two" that clearly governed Dr. King's push for total human liberty and decency in America. These liberal concepts gave Dr. King both the moral and ethical covering against the harsh winds of adversity that blew upon him regularly. But how often had he heard the words of Jesus taught to his early disciples: "But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Later in his career, King posed this question, "...does love have a relationship to our modern fear of war, economic displacement, and racial injustice? Hate is rooted in fear, and the only cure for fear-hate is love."<sup>5</sup>

In response to the social climate of the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, King made a remarkable critique of American Christendom. Mostly silent in the face of enormous

racial strife, economic injustice, cultural and social violence, King said, “The judgment of God is upon the Church. The Church has a schism in its own soul that it must close. It will be one of the tragedies of Christian history if future historians record that at the height of the twentieth century the Church was one of the greatest bulwarks of white supremacy.”<sup>6</sup> The social unrest which culminated from the May, 17, 1955 Supreme Court decision that ordered Southern schools to desegregate with “all deliberate speed,” was met with passionate outcries on both sides of the racial divide. Social philosopher, bell hook’s argues that, “by the late 1960s class-based racial integration disrupted the racial solidarity that often held black folks together despite class difference.”<sup>7</sup> By many, though, *Brown v. Board of Education* was viewed as an amazing civil rights accomplishment; nonetheless, the court decision left behind painful scars for a society reluctant to change, and resistant to do so.

Clearly, for untold numbers of minorities, the doors of integration in American educational institutions was the beginning of economic and social opportunities, not heard of prior to the 1950’s. The novel voice of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his preacher/activism was the beginning of clarion call for numerous other important gains toward social and economic justice in America. In fact “both black and white young activists in the early 1960’s shared this idealistic dream and dismissed significant obstacles.”<sup>8</sup> The revolutionary impact of the events of the 1960’s, which brought forth, mass protest rallies, marches, sit-ins and boycotts began the rewrite of the history of American democracy.

Dr. king’s voice, vision and message of economic and social justice for all is inextricably linked to the economic success stories of all African Americans in the post

civil rights era of the 1950's and 1960's. Forty years hence, the complexion of the nation is more diverse than it has ever been. Everyone who wants to improve their lives may do so without the stigma of color, in principle, as a hindrance. And one cannot help but be impressed when Newsweek's cover story in 2002, profiles three of the most powerful CEO's in America as African American. The list included, Kenneth Chenault, CEO of American Express, Stanely O'Neal, CEO of Merrill Lynch, Richard Parsons CEO of Time Warner. In 2005 five mega-companies in the top100 United States corporations had African Americans as CEOs.<sup>9</sup> Though these achievements are impressive, no one believes that America need yet rest on her laurels concerning racial equality and economic parity. The achievement of the nation's brightest and best speak volumes to the flexibilities of a thriving free market society; and to the faith, sacrifice, hard work and determination of these talented and successful individuals. Yet, these four decades after the Civil Rights Movement, if one may continue to intuit the preaching and great vision of Dr. Martin Luther King for a radically equal and just society in America, one must also discern the seriousness of growing racial disparities in income, education and home ownership that by some data are growing. For instance, white households had incomes that were two-thirds higher than blacks and that were forty percent higher than Hispanics in 2006 according to figures released by the Census Bureau.<sup>10</sup>

While a growing underclass exists among poor whites, Hispanics and blacks, the reality is, African Americans are now a part of an ever-growing and expanding middle and upper class. In fact, in nearly every major profession: education, politics, business, athletics and entertainment, blacks have made enormous strides and in some instances have become extremely wealthy. Even though there is much more to be done if America

hopes to live up to its promise of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of happiness for all, people like Denzel Washington, Hallie Berry, Michael Jordan, Tiger Wood, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby and Barak Obama, to name only a few are living examples of the good that has come of the resonant voice and preaching of, Martin Luther King, Jr. His is a dream voiced that is still waiting to fulfill itself many thousands of times over in the lives of people all across America who still hear his voice and hope in his dream.

The real noteworthy influence of King's voice today will be in keeping the truths of it alive and not to allow the precious nuggets of his wisdom to perish in silence. King believed that all should have free access regardless of race or ethnic group and said so in this eloquent and passionate speech:

As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I have a million dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people in this world cannot expect to live more than twenty-eight or thirty years, I can never be totally healthy even if I just got a good checkup at Mayo Clinic. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be."<sup>11</sup>

Also, Dr. King understood the transitory impact of poverty, illiteracy and crime—that it can and does come in all colors -- black, white, red, brown, it really doesn't matter along color lines. If a person is impoverished and is deprived of a means of providing for common daily needs, then those individuals might eventually resort to the basest aspects of his or her political perspectives in an attempt to make ends meet. A person's economic well-being is a major determinant in the formation of his or her economic context with moral values. It is well known, regardless of race or class, that most Americans generally want the same thing. They want to live in a safe and secure society, free from violence and immorality; a society

that is open to social and economic opportunities and where their children can have a fair expectation of a good future. Obviously, Dr. King suffered with those who suffered, but he steadily fought for the kind of equality and fairness that would absolve the suffering of those who suffered for poverty, illiteracy and crime.

Today, a voice like Dr. King's is wanted to be heard again. With the rise of mega churches and flamboyant preachers turned CEO's of multimillion-dollar enterprises, the conciliatory voice of redemptive suffering, social justice and equality is never heard. Many preachers who have the influence have not taken up the mantle of Dr. King. With their wide appeal and seemingly unlimited flow of money, either could easily assume that role with a convincing voice that champions the cause of those who live in a society that is still pitted with economic potholes and racial injustice that is a simmering cauldron right below the fabric of American life and society. But they have not done so. Instead, they preach a New Gospel of personal gain, self-aggrandizement and personality cultism they simply suggest is essential to a pleasing spiritual life in God. There are some who, especially in the black community, according to a May 2006 Black Enterprise article, who make an sincere effort to separate the church and the business interest; many mega church leaders, may "represent the black community's only line of defense against apathetic-politicians and failing institutions. They are the last bastion of social entrepreneurs creating businesses that appeal to congregants' spiritual needs and providing jobs within African American communities."<sup>12</sup> King believed that through the pooling of resources "and the development of habits of thrift and techniques of wise investment, the Negro will be doing his share to grapple with his problem of economic deprivation."<sup>13</sup> In as much as millions of dollars yearly are being collected from the black community from mega churches, some effort to re-resource the black community with

some of those funds could alleviate great disparities in wealth in many of the most deprived black communities.

It must also be remembered, if King is to be remembered spiritually and truthfully, that he never sought material wealth, social status or personal accolades. Instead, he rebuffed all attempts to fall trap to the abyss of greed or self-interest. When he spoke of himself in terms of his legacy in the famous Drum Major Sermon, he revealed clearly how he wanted to be remembered. He said:

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize, that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards, that's not important. Tell him not to mention where I went to school. I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others..."<sup>14</sup>

In the murky waters of self absorption, many in places of spiritual leadership have lost sight of the real enemy of social and economic oppression. In the words of Gary A. Haugen, "The struggle against injustice is not fought on the battlefield of power or truth or even righteousness. There are pitched battles waged on these ramparts, but the war is ultimately won or lost on a more forward front. In the end the battle against oppression stands or falls on the battlefield of hope."<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther King's concern was for the souls of humankind and the human dignity of the individual. King was a preacher with a definite message of uplift. What made him unique among other leaders was his ability to give hope to countless numbers of persons who felt dehumanized by the heavy hand of

unjust political and social policies and practices. And though King was not a politician, politically, it is safe to view King through the lens of evangelical liberalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King, ed. *Martin Luther King, Jr. Companion* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1993), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Measure of a Man* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Rufus Burrow, Jr., *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2006), 71.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishing, 1991), 513.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. Coretta Scott King, ed. *Martin Luther King, Jr. Companion* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1993), 26.

<sup>7</sup> bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 91.

<sup>8</sup> John W. Whitehead, *Grasping for the Wind: The search for meaning in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 187.

<sup>9</sup> Del Jones, USA Today "Companies with Black CEOs"  
[http://www.usatoday.com/money/companies/management/2005-03-07-bell-usat\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/companies/management/2005-03-07-bell-usat_x.htm) (8 March, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Nikki Kahn, "Census Report: Broad Racial disparities persist," The Washing Post file  
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15704759/> (14 Nov. 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Measure of a Man* (Minneapolis, MN: 1988), 45-46.

<sup>12</sup> Nicole Marie Richardson, Krissah Williams, and Hamil R. Harris, "The Business of Faith," *Black Enterprise* 36, no.10 (May 2006):103-114.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope*, 579.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament Hope*, 267.

<sup>15</sup> Gary A. Haugen, *Good News About Injustice: A Witness of Courage in a Hurting World* (Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1999), 67.