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## Revisiting the drum major for justice and peace: M. L. King, Jr.

Byron A. Ellis

*Consultant and Executive Director of The Jethro Project (TJP)*

*email: [ellis@jethroproject.com](mailto:ellis@jethroproject.com).*

### Background

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a preacher and leader of a nonviolent movement that continues to transform America and the world. He was one of the twentieth century's most influential men and lived an extraordinary life. He led the civil rights movement that rebelled against segregation. He synthesized ideas drawn from many different cultural traditions and became one of the world's best-known advocates of non-violent social change strategies.

Dr. King's roots were in the African-American Baptist church. However, he was not a proponent of religious emotionalism and questioned literal interpretations of scripture. He greatly admired black social gospel proponents, such as his father who saw the church as an instrument for improving the lives of African Americans (Carson, 1998).

On December 5, 1955, soon after Rosa Parks' refusal to obey the rules mandating segregation on buses, King was elected president of the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association and black residents launched a bus boycott (Carson, 1998). According to Carson, King gained national prominence as a result of his exceptional oratorical skills and personal courage.

In preparing the Montgomery boycott, King skillfully used creative tension to promulgate his vision of freedom to the oppressed and to the nation. During his speech at Holt Street Baptist Church on 5 December 1955, he established the current reality that segregation in Montgomery and in other areas of the nation was not new; it existed for endless years, and he noted that African-Americans were inflicted with the paralysis of crippling fears on buses in their communities (King, 1955). He assured the audience that they were at this point in history because they were determined to get the situation corrected. And that intimidation, humiliation and oppression of African-Americans because of the sheer fact that they were of African descent should not continue. He also shared his vision with the audience, which was also their vision.

Dr. King said, my friends, I want it to be known that we're going to work with grim and bold determination to gain justice on the buses in this city (King, 1955). Furthermore, he stated, I want to say that in all of our actions, we must stick together. Unity is the great need of the hour, and if we are united we can get many of the things that we not only desire but which we justly deserve.

During the struggle for liberation from anti-Christian governance many attempts were used to suppress King and the movement. His house was bombed and he

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was convicted along with other boycott leaders on charges of conspiring to interfere with the bus company's operations.

The Montgomery buses were desegregated in December of 1956, after the United States Supreme Court declared Alabama's segregation laws unconstitutional (Carson, 1998).

Subsequent to the successful Montgomery boycott movement, King and other southern black ministers founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957. Their aim was "To save the soul of America." King as the president of SCLC emphasized the voting rights of African-Americans. Unfortunately, after Montgomery, King's organizing actions were put on hold for about five years.

On August 28, 1963, he led more than 250,000 protesters to Washington, DC, and delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. In 1964, Time magazine featured him as Man of the Year and in December of that year he received the Nobel Peace Prize.

In spite of these tributes, King's leadership conflicted with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and later with Malcolm X's message of self-defense and African-American nationalism.

In the North, Malcolm X embodied African-American discontent and his views were more acceptable than King's moderation. King encountered increasing resistance not only from national political leaders who wanted to perpetuate the status quo, including FBI director J. Edgar Hoover.

Hoover's efforts to undermine King's leadership were intensified during 1967 as urban racial violence escalated and King criticized American intervention in the Vietnam War (Carson, 1998).

## **Nonviolent Action**

King used nonviolent direct action to attain his vision of African-American liberation. Thus, his strategies for rational and non-destructive social change galvanized the conscience of America and reordered its priorities (Brown, 1995).

King became acquainted with Mohandas Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent social protest during his seminary days. He visited India in 1959 and met with followers of Gandhi. Thus, he became convinced that Gandhian nonviolent resistance was the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.

Using non-violence, the Selma to Montgomery march influenced the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Moreover, King's commitment to Christian principles endowed him with a mechanism to affect the conscience of America. Therefore, his words, actions,

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commitment, and dreams for a new cast of life, are intertwined with the American experience of change (Brown, 1995).

## **The Vietnam War**

King viewed the Vietnam War as the enemy of the poor (Rockwell, n.d.). According to Rockwell, King saw the war's impact on poverty programs and how it had dashed the real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white. The anti-poverty funds were being allocated to the war efforts and not to the poor and hopeless. Rockwell points to Dr. King's comprehensive anti-war address at Riverside Church, where he asserted, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." During the speech, King reminded the audience "that United States lawlessness abroad breeds violence within the United States as well" (Rockwell). In essence, American leaders were signaling to citizens that violence and deception were viable means for solving problems.

King recognized that he had to oppose violence, not only in the ghettos of America, but violence everywhere. Thus, he had to speak clearly against the greatest purveyor of violence in the world (Rockwell, n.d.). King also addressed the draft and the imbalance in military recruitment. King felt that United States intervention was administered and organized at the expense of the poor, especially at the expense of people of color.

Accordingly, in the Korean and Vietnam wars, African Americans and Latinos were drafted way out of proportion to their civilian numbers. White middle-class college students got a preferential program - college deferment (Rockwell, n.d.). Rockwell notes that in the face of gross inequities, King was color caring, not "color blind."

Rockwell (n.d.) highlights the positions taken by major news publications of King's anti-war agenda. For instance, The Washington Post claimed that King's anti-war position was "irresponsible;" The New York Times chastised King for going beyond the allotted domain of black leaders, civil rights; and TIME called King's anti-war stand "demagogic slander...a script for Radio Hanoi." Thus, Rockwell (n.d.) notes, "The media responses to Dr. King's calls for peace were so venomous that King's two recent biographers - Stephen Oates and David Garrow - devoted whole chapters to the media blitz against King's internationalism." Nonetheless, with the passage of time, it is clear that King's position on the Vietnam War was timely and accurate.

King's understanding and commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ made the relationship of his ministry to peace making so obvious that he marveled at those who asked him why he was speaking against the war. Thus, he would rhetorically ask, could it be that they do not know that the Good News was meant for all men—for communists and capitalists, for their children and ours, for blacks and for whites, for revolutionaries and conservatives? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved His enemies so fully that He died for them? What then can I say to the Vietcong or

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to Castro or to Mao as a faithful minister of this one? Can I threaten them with death or must I not share with them my life (King, Jr., 1967)?

King also believed that he should be true to his conviction and share with all men the calling to be a son of the living God. Thus, he believed that he was called by the Father to speak in behalf of His suffering and helpless outcast children. Additionally, his allegiances and loyalties were broader and deeper than nationalism and beyond the nation's self-defined goals and positions (King, Jr., 1967). They were embedded in Christ.

He further believed that we are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls 'enemy,' for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers (King, Jr., 1967).

### **American Christians**

King in one of his sermons imagined receiving a letter from the apostle Paul to be read to the congregation and passed along to other churches. In the imaginary letter Paul addresses American Christians. Paul acknowledges that Americans can do so many things today that he could not do in the Greco-Roman world. However, he questions America's moral and spiritual progress. He notes that moral and spiritual progress lags behind scientific progress.

Thus, Paul urges America to keep moral and spiritual progress abreast with scientific progress and to prevent material means from outdistancing the spiritual ends for which we live (King, 1956).

In King's imaginary letter, Paul addresses Christian responsibility. He asserts that the responsibility of Christians is to emulate Christ in the midst of a non-Christian world, because that is the duty of every Christian. Paul, however, knows that many Christians in America give their ultimate allegiance to man-made systems and customs (King, 1956). Thus, they are more concerned with social acceptance than following the mandates of Christ; they are afraid to be different (King, 1956). Therefore, for many American Christians, morality is merely group consensus.

Paul proceeds to deliver the same message to American Christians as he delivered to Roman Christians. He encourages them not to become conformed to this world, but be to be transformed by the renewing their minds. He also tells them that they are a colony of heaven and therefore their allegiance is with Jesus, God incarnate; not to the government, not to the state, not to the nation, not to any man-made institution. Furthermore, if any earthly institution conflicts with God's will, it is our Christian duty to take a stand against it (King, 1956).

In the imaginary letter, King exhorts American Christians to turn away from materialistic propensities and look more toward the plight of their brothers and sisters. Thus, he asked American Christians to work within the framework of democracy to bring about a better distribution of wealth. Furthermore, he notes that God never intended for

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one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject deadening poverty (King, 1956).

King, through, Paul turns to the American churches and asserts that the church is the Body of Christ, “So when the church is true to its nature it knows neither division nor disunity” (King, 1956). However, Paul sees in America a multitude of denomination warring with one another, and wants America to see that God is neither a Baptist nor a Methodist, neither a Presbyterian nor a Episcopalian (King). Additionally, the Roman Catholic claim of infallibility and the pretension of being the only true church were disturbing. Thus, he exhorts Roman Catholicism to exert great effort to mend its ways.

Paul also points out that American Christians that have allowed segregation to creep into the doors of the church (King, 1956). He notes that discrimination divides the Body of Christ by race and ethnicity, negating the oneness in Christ and proclaims that Americans must face the tragic fact that when they stand at 11:00 on Sunday morning to sing ‘All Hail the Power of Jesus Name’ and ‘Dear Lord and Father of all Mankind,’ they stand in the most segregated hour of Christian America (King).

It is, therefore, appalling that there is more integration in the world than in the Body of Christ. Thus, Paul repeats what he had said to earlier Christians 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, he reiterates the words that he 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.” Finally, he urges Americans to stop denying Christ and embrace His love.

## **The Historical King**

The ministry of King’s father and grandfather were in the social gospel tradition. Thus, King’s religious roots were in the social gospel tradition. The historical King, however, was exceptionally gifted, fascinating, and a courageous individual, who challenged authority and took such controversial stands as opposing American intervention in Vietnam and mobilizing the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 (Carson, 1990).

Early biographical sketches of Dr. King were friendly accounts written by acquaintances and, for most part, failed to acknowledge his limitations. King, however, was not a lone ranger; he was part of a broad movement that had a common goal, with different visions toward the goal of liberation. Thus, factions in the movement often challenged his leadership (Carson, 1990).

King, although trained in systematic theology, published no significant writing in this field. His main intellectual contribution was in the area of Christian social practice (Carson, 1990). Thus, the social gospel tradition shaped his cognitive process. Nevertheless, he was different from his contemporaries, in that he was able to use the gospel to create tension within the cultural framework of his day. He advocated

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unconventional political ideas (Carson) and extended the boundaries of African-American religious and, in general, American thought. Additionally, unlike other African-American preachers, King was not fond of emotionalism. Rather, he advocated Christian social activism and militant nonviolent strategies to achieve radical social change (Carson).

King, however, was not the innocuous dreamer portrayed by today's media. The later King, like Malcolm X, increasingly began to speak of the American nightmare, and emphasized the deep economic roots of racism. Thus, he began to see his work as revolutionary rather than reformism (Honey, 1993). As a result, some scholars do not see him as the single leader of the civil rights movement. In fact, they attribute less action to him than the mainstream media. For instance, Ling (1998) notes that it is misleading to portray the Civil Rights movement as exclusively a southern struggle intent on ending desegregation and disenfranchisement in the South.

Dr. King made history by the causes he pursued. Likewise, we each can make history by the causes we pursue; it is more common, however, that we make history by the many times we stand aside (Ling, 1998). Nonetheless, to stand aside is a sin; therefore to him that knows to do good, and does it not, to him it is sin (John 4:17). Thus, King's concept of the guilty bystander still points us to the injustices that we support by our inaction.

Jesus, in Matthew 25:41-46, described how the Son of Man would appear in his glory to assemble all the world's population before him and then divide it as a shepherd separates sheep from goats (Braun, 1998). Christ tells us that the Son of Man separates those on the left and curses them into the everlasting fire, because He was hungry and they did not give Him meat, He was a stranger and they did not take Him in. Therefore, like King it is paramount for Christian believers to stand against injustices.

## **God's Call**

Martin Luther King, Jr. grew up around ministers. Thus, he understood the power of God and that God revealed himself to us through Jesus, the Christ. He therefore had a Christian world-view. However, he was not a passive Christian; like his father and grandfather he was a social activist, a believer in living the gospel of Jesus Christ. That conviction led him to speak out against the oppressive and ungodly treatment of African-American in United States of America, and against oppression everywhere. The inequality of distribution and allocation of goods and services also affected him, particularly, the fact that a small number of individuals selfishly control vast resources of our Father.

King, like Abraham and others before him, believed that God was guiding him to save the soul of America. Thus, raised in a society engulfed by oppression and humiliation, King believed that he had a social and moral responsibility to educate the nation about the evils of racism and the violence it perpetrated on the victims and the perpetrators (Pallotti, 1998).

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The Lord our God raises Prophets from our people for us to listen to (Deut. 18:15). The country and the world listened and learned from Dr. King. He transformed America with his oratorical skills and Christ-centered messages. His communication skills were a gift from God (Eph. 4:8). He embraced the word of God and exhorted others, particularly Christians to be true to Christ. He placed God's instructions before America and the world; thus he was a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourishing on the words of the faith and of the good doctrine, which he had attained (1 Tim 4:6). As a result of his Christian-centered values, he used non-violent means to change the conscience of America.

### **King's Biblical Perspective**

Biblical leadership is a gift from God (Rom. 12:6). King's gift was his extraordinary vision, as well as his oratorical skills, which won him a large following. Thus, his gift made him an extraordinary visionary leader. Furthermore, like biblical leaders he defined the current reality of the nation and postulated God's reality, where all of God's children could enjoy the fruit of the land.

As an effective leader, he encouraged contrary opinion (DePree, 1987). Like John the Baptist, he was a voice crying in the wilderness (John 1:23; Luke 3:4; Mark 1:3) in his opposition to segregation, the Vietnam War, and in advocating poverty programs. He led outwardly by example and spoke the word of God to those who would listen. Hebrew 13:7 asks us to remember leaders who speak the word of God to us, and that we should consider the outcome of their way of life. Biblical leaders are servants; King served the nation, not in an official capacity, but as a drum major for justice and peace.

King's critics argue that his managerial skills were poor. Moses' managerial and oratorical talents were wanting. However, like King, there were others with those talents appointed by God to help. Moses had Jethro, his father-in-law, who taught him how to manage (Ex. 18:21) and Aaron who spoke for him. Thus, the fact that King may have not had managerial skills does not diminish his instrumentally to God.

### **How King Emulated Jesus**

Like Biblical leaders, King was a servant of the people, representing their concerns. Jesus was also a servant, representing the concerns of the Father. In John 13:4-11, Jesus by washing the feet of the disciples gives us an example of servant leadership to follow.

King used the word of God to highlight unchristian behaviors, such as segregation and the dehumanization of God's children, both at home and abroad. Thus, his relationship with Jesus Christ gave him the courage to face the possibility of death that comes from speaking truth to earthly powers.

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Dr. King's life and the civil rights movement in the United States cannot be understood without recognizing that it was the religious vision of the Gospel that was the driving force of both (Pallotti, 1998). For King, achieving freedom from oppression was so precious, so dear, and so eternally true that he was willing to lay his life down for it. Christ also willingly lay down his life for our salvation, in obedience to God the Father.

King's leadership was sacrificial and one of servanthood and this is true leadership as exemplified by Jesus, our Christ.

### **King's Spiritual Leadership**

King gave form and order to the civil rights movement. He used the Word of God to instruct the nation and it penetrated the conscience of America. Thus, King preached love. Some Americans, however, are still unwilling to share God's bounty with their neighbors at home or abroad.

King's "I have a dream" speech encouraged the audience to rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. He contrasted tangible physical force with spiritual (soul) force. He knew that we worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24) and envisioned, that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together (King, 1963).

King's appeal to America was to let freedom ring, to let the Spirit of God in. And, by doing so all Americans would be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, would be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty we are free at last! (King, 1963).

### **King Fulfilled the Expectation of Christian Leadership**

According to Deacon Pallotti (1998), the most effective form of evangelization and inter-religious dialogue are the witnesses of those who take God seriously in the world. King epitomized a leader who took God seriously; he had faith, as well as works (John 2:14). Moreover, he understood the plight of the poor and exhorted wealthy American Christians to share God's possessions with those less fortunate. He knew that faith without works is dead (John 3:20). As a result, he helped Christians to understand that in Christ we are all one (Gal. 3:28).

Some critics, however, do not believe that King should be held as role models for Christians because of his association with socialism. However, Dennis Day, a resident of New York City and member of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, notes that such criticism was peculiar; since, given the entire historic contributions of men and women to Christendom, King is one of the more suitable and prominent role model. Thus, he found

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it reprehensible that King's critics would argue that he should not be held as a Christian role model.

King preached, and wrote of, the Gospel of a resurrected Christ that returned to the right hand of the Father. Moreover, his leadership and his dealings with others, including those that hated him, was the idea of "agape love." Hence, he was unequivocally a Christian role model.

### **Civil Government**

King (1963) noted that when the architects of the republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all citizens, black, white, native Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, would be guaranteed the 'unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

According to King (1963), it was obvious that America defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color. He noted that instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America gave people of African descent a bad check; a check, which has come back, marked insufficient funds.

Thus, from King's perspective, the government was complicit in the condition of African-Americans. In a sense, the government's policies were hypocritical. Moreover, a government that holds one group of people superior and another group inferior is not a civil government; rather it is a barbaric government. Nevertheless, King wanted African-Americans to be cognizant that in the process of gaining their rightful place, they must not be guilty of wrongful deeds (King, 1963). Meaning that under all circumstances they should show civility.

King's claim for justice was anchored in God, the higher power (Rom. 13:1). Thus, he clearly recognized that civil government had limited authority and their authority did not extend to limiting God's given inalienable rights. African-Americans were entitled to justice and equal participation in their nation.

King was, therefore, within his Godly rights to dissent with an unchristian government. God requires citizens to choose wise men to govern them, to represent them in civil governments. Therefore, King was keenly aware that white Americans were accountable for the government's misdeeds (Heb. 13:17). And, that God mandates that civil governments apply the laws equally to all. It is ironic, however, that American Christian churches stood idle by and tolerated the oppression of God's children, their sisters and brothers in Christ.

### **Responsibility towards Society**

King wanted to heal societal divisions, particularly ethnic and class divisions. He sought unity and equality within the nation. For instance, King (1963) did not want to

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satisfy the thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. Rather, he envisioned that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Likewise, he envisioned that the sons of former slaves and former slave owners would be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

King (1963) understood that at some point in America the glory of the Lord would be revealed, and all flesh would see it together. Thus, he yearned to bring about unity in the nation by emphasizing the unity of God's children.

Above all, King was a responsible and civil leader. He did not engender the spirit of violence. Thus, he fulfilled his responsibility to a civil society, although the society that he lived in was far from civil to him and to people of color.

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