

The Preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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It is with a deep sense of humility and trepidation that I stand before you today to talk about an American icon, a legend, a drum major for truth, and one of the most important and significant figures of the twentieth century—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I do not consider myself a scholar or an expert on the life and legacy of this great man of God. There are numerous scholars and researchers who are more qualified to speak on this subject than I. They have spent many years plumbing the depths of the complex theological, social and political tapestry of Dr. King's life and witness. They have put forth a gallant effort to capture the crucial identity of Martin Luther King, Jr. Furthermore, there are those who lived during King's era, who walked with him, talked with him, touched him and heard him preach who, perhaps, could better articulate his life's story and the effectiveness of his preaching.

We know about Dr. King's life as a civil rights leader. That is well documented in the pages of history. We know about the enormous struggles and the burden he carried as the principal spokesperson of the movement. We know about his Nobel Peace Prize. We know about the marches he led. We know about the ultimate price he paid in Memphis, Tennessee. We could spend a semester,

or even a year, talking about Martin Luther King as a religious, political and social leader—though it is hard to separate these important roles. But I am here to talk about Martin Luther King, Jr. as a preacher of the gospel.

One of the great sources on the subject is a book written by Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King*. It was named the outstanding book of 1995-1996 by the Religious Speech Communication Association. My lecture will be both a review of and a response to Lischer's seminal work on King as a preacher.

Influences on King's Life and Preaching

While many would describe Dr. King as an iconoclastic hero for social justice, King described himself in more humble and down-to-earth terms. He often said, "In the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher."ⁱ Like a preacher, he routinely cited the Bible as the authority for his social activities and cast the civil rights movement in light of biblical events and characters.ⁱⁱ Lischer suggested that the substance of his sermons was translated into civil addresses and fiery mass-meeting speeches, but it was always *preaching* that he was doing. Even when no text was cited and the Deity was not

mentioned, the audiences to these speeches considered themselves no less a congregation. King's self-proclaimed mission "to redeem the soul of America" cannot be understood apart from his self-designated identity as a preacher of the gospel.ⁱⁱⁱ

But who influenced Dr. King? What factors helped him to become who he was? Lischer believed several factors helped to shape Dr. King as a preacher. First, and foremost, King was influenced by his childhood church, the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He loved the church and its people, and they loved him like a son.^{iv} At Ebenezer, King heard his father, Martin Luther King, Sr. (affectionately known as Daddy King), preach fiery and soul-stirring sermons each week. In the 1930s and '40s, Ebenezer is reported to have had more than 4,000 members, who came from both ends of the economic spectrum—the black bourgeois to skilled and unskilled workers. "Despite his congregation's influential membership, Daddy King saw to it that Ebenezer never lost its mass identity as a talk-back, whooping, gospel singing, working man's church."^v

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a senior in high school, when he began thinking seriously about entering the ministry. His calling was not a spectacular *eureka* moment. He said, "My call to the ministry was not a miraculous or supernatural something, on the contrary it was an inner urge calling me to serve humanity."^{vi} He was eighteen years old when he preached his first sermon that, according to Lischer, he borrowed from Harry Emerson Fosdick's "Life is What You Make It."^{vii}

Lischer also asserted that King was influenced by the tradition of black preachers and reformers who came before him. He suggested two lines of influencing factors in the black church tradition shaped King's development as a preacher. Lischer called them the "Sustainers" and the "Reformers."^{viii} He described the Sustainers as those who ministered to the spiritual needs of enslaved and segregated people but never attempted to revolutionize the conditions under which they lived. Their strategy was to preach a gospel that relied heavily on the eschatological hope that circumstances would eventually change in the great by and by. Lischer wrote, "King explicitly rejected otherworldly preaching but admired the Sustainers' strategy of affirming the worth of the oppressed."

Dr. King embraced the ideology of the Reformers. Lischer wrote, "If King had been asked to place himself within the African-American preaching tradition, he would have undoubtedly identified with the Reformers—with Richard Allen, Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Tubman, Alexander Crummell, Edward Blyden... Frederick Douglas" and others. The Reformers were those who would raise holy Cain for the freedom of the race. They insisted on having freedom and justice right now instead of waiting on an eschatological rescue in the distant future. They resisted oppression and called the nation to be held accountable for its actions. However, for King, the resistance was to be non-violent. He was a reformer who believed evil must always be resisted but any suffering, however underserved, that facilitates the good of the whole must be embraced.^{ix}

I find it ironic that Dr. King would embrace the Reformers' strategy because his birth name was Michael Luther King, Jr. In 1934, his father changed his own name and that of his son from Michael to Martin after returning from a trip to Germany, the homeland of the man who sparked the Protestant Reformation—Martin Luther. Martin Luther King, Jr., like the man after whom he was named, was a reformer in the truest sense. The Reformers' tradition shaped Dr. King's preaching.

Lischer also indicated that Dr. King's preaching was influenced by his role models and mentors who taught him and made a difference in his life. When he arrived at Morehouse College in Atlanta, he met the venerable Dr. Benjamin Mays. Mays was an eloquent and erudite speaker—an orator. May's eloquent phrases and quotations impressed King and, Lischer pointed out, King often borrowed them, weaving them into his sermons and speeches throughout his career. It was from Mays, for example, that King first heard the challenge, "Clearly, then, it isn't how long one lives that is important, but how well he lives, what he contributes to mankind and how noble the goals toward which he strives. Longevity is good . . . but longevity is not all-important."^x

Lischer saw Mays as an important figure in young Martin King's life because he offered a viable option to his father's style of preaching.^{xi} King Sr. had a flare for the dramatic. He was a whooper—at various moments in the sermon, he gave his words a rhythmic and musical value. King Jr. was a flat-footed, straight-laced preacher—no antics. He actually disdained the showmanship and loud emotional outburst of black preaching at

the time. However, King did appreciate his father and, from his father, he learned what Lischer called, "a composite impression of the pulpit's authority in the community."^{xii} In other words, King learned how to use the pulpit as an agent of change.

Some of the other mentors who influenced King's preaching were: William Holmes Borders, pastor of the Wheat Street Baptist Church in Atlanta. The young King and some of his friends would sneak away from Ebenezer to hear this educated and learned man preach.^{xiii} There was also Dr. Sandy Ray, pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Brooklyn New York. Most of all, King was influenced by Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, also of Brooklyn, who some would argue was one of the greatest preachers of the twentieth century. Lischer wrote, "To King he (Taylor) was an example of John Chrysostom's observation: 'he is a rare preacher who can move the masses without losing his soul.'^{xiv}

King's preaching was also influenced by his seminary and graduate school training at Crozer Seminary and later at Boston University. Each of these institutions exposed King to a theology different from what he had learned at Ebenezer and Morehouse College. At Crozer, King's main focus was systematic theology with an enormous concentration of courses on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Boston University, in the late 1940s and '50s, was a center of liberal theological thought.^{xv} At these institutions, King was introduced to the tradition and vocabulary of Western theology. He was exposed to "higher criticism," which questioned the historicity of the Bible.

Concerning the liberal bent of King's education, Lischer wrote, "In seminary and graduate school King internalized the vocabulary and values of theological liberalism; he did not become a liberal but embraced a new language with which to rationalize his more original religious instincts."^{xvi} Lischer concluded that King's theological education provided the vocabulary and conceptual framework of his sermons at Ebenezer and his larger message to the nation.

While King was learning the vocabulary of liberalism at Crozer, he was receiving classroom instruction in homiletics. His transcripts reveal that he took nine courses in homiletics.^{xvii} The dominant preaching style King was taught at Crozer was topical rather than textual. He was taught that the sermon should begin, not so much with a biblical text in mind, but with a "felt difficulty," which the preacher then would define, classify and solve. While King used different kinds of topical methodologies, Lischer pointed out that he was devoted mostly to the Hegelian "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" style of topical preaching.^{xviii} King fine-tuned this approach to preaching under the tutelage of the great J. Pius Barbour, a friend of his father. Barbour was known to have put the black students at Crozer through his rigorous homiletical drills. For King, the drill began on Saturday when he came to the parsonage to eat at the Barbour table and to practice his sermon before a mirror in the parlor. He is remembered to have worked harder on pronunciation and memorization than the other students in his class.^{xix}

Other important factors that influenced the preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr. were his call in 1954 to pastor the Dexter

Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and his almost simultaneous appointment as the principal spokesperson for the civil rights movement in America. In light of the many hats that Dr. King wore, it is easy to forget he was a pastor of a local church. As a pastor, he visited the sick, managed the daily affairs of the church, performed weddings, baptized candidates and preached sermons, all while completing his doctoral dissertation.^{xx} Lischer was also careful to point out that during his first year in Montgomery, King presided over a church that was usually one-half to two-thirds filled. Around black Montgomery, the word on the young pastor was that he was a good but not great preacher.^{xxi}

One can only imagine how busy King must have been once the boycott began in Montgomery and his national responsibilities increased. All of this undoubtedly had an effect on his preaching. Lischer wrote, "During his five years at Dexter, King established his canon of sermons. His schedule did not permit him to prepare new messages every week. Modifications and developments in his thinking as well as changes in current events he simply integrated into the old familiar sermons, which he repeated again and again."^{xxii}

How King Performed As a Preacher

In the second section of the book, Lischer moved from the factors that helped to prepare Martin Luther King for ministry to factors that had an impact on the sermons he preached. It is well documented that the issue of plagiarism hangs as a weight on the King legacy. Lischer dealt with the issue head-on. He cited examples of how King often

borrowed sermonic material, outlines and phrases from the sermons of such great and noted preachers as Phillips Brooks, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Howard Thurman, Wallace Hamilton and George Buttrick. According to Lischer, King rarely cited his sources or gave any attribution to those from whom he borrowed. However, Lischer insisted that we not judge Dr. King on the basis of plagiarism, but that we look at the bigger picture of what he did with the material. He suggested that King often borrowed an outline, a thought or a phrase and used it as the scaffolding around which he went on to build his own convictions in his sermons and speeches. “The outlines [that King borrowed from others] provided a method for organizing the convictions and applying them to the problem of race in the twentieth century.”^{xxiii}

Lischer concluded that we should consider the full force of his preaching and not merely the printed records of some of his early sermons.^{xxiv} No one can accuse King of borrowing the event he created through what he preached. The change he helped to bring about is something no one can accuse him of borrowing. No one can accuse him of borrowing the fact that God used his sermons and speeches to prick the conscious of a nation.

My opinion is that Dr. King, as a young preacher (before he ever dreamed of becoming larger than life), borrowed sermon material from others (as many of us have). He had no way of knowing he would one day become so famous that nearly every word he wrote or spoke publicly would be subjected to the scrutiny of researchers. The lesson for all of us is that it is best to be honest

because one never knows how famous one might become.

In terms of style and delivery of sermons, Lischer presented King as a master of rhetoric. The musicality, intonation and rhythm of his speaking did for his preaching what his written sermons could never capture. King powerfully used allegory, metaphor, typologies and other literary devices in order to move the hearers’ hearts and minds.

King spoke as a prophet to the nation, often under great stress because of personal threats against his life. Lischer wrote, “By 1968, the FBI had investigated fifty plots to kill him. He was also the recipient of an enormous volume of hate mail that poured into SCLC headquarters on a daily basis.”^{xxv} Again, Lischer wrote, “Staffer John Gibson remembers that toward the end of his life, King was able to relax only when surrounded by friends in rooms without windows. In public he let his eyes unconsciously dart from face to face, looking for his assassin.”^{xxvi}

Imagine yourself trying to preach under those circumstances. Imagine how difficult it would be to prepare sermons—with death threats looming—and you are worried not only for your own safety but that of your wife and children. When I look at what he accomplished as a preacher, in light of the very personal and real-life pressures he was facing, my admiration for Dr. King (in spite of his shortcomings) is deepened.

The Substance of King’s Preaching

In the third and final section of the book, Lischer moved into the substance and/or

theology of King's preaching. Lischer suggested that, during a time when higher criticism was (and still is) challenging the Bible's credibility as a historically reliable book, Dr. King embraced a progressive interpretation of scriptural truths. He started with the major ideas of the Scripture, followed them as they developed across

redemptive history and saw them as they culminated in Christ and his gospel.^{xxvii} In his review of this section of the book, Kirk Jones suggested that Lischer portrayed King as having effectively linked (as many black preachers have done) the suffering and hope of persons in biblical narratives to the suffering and hope of black people.^{xxviii}

ⁱ Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1995), 3.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 16.

^v *Ibid.*, 21.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 27.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 28.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 34.

^x *Ibid.*, 43.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 44.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 46.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 49.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 51.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 51, 58.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 53.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 65.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 69.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, 78.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 80.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 81.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 95.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, 109.

^{xxv} *Ibid.*, 171.

^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, 171.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, 200.

^{xxviii} *Christian Century* (June 5, 1996),

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n19_v113/ai_18408213/pg_3; accessed 6/26/06.