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The Missing Link: The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Early Sermons

Susan Englander

In February 1960, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church pastor Martin Luther King, Jr., returned to his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia to provide more hands-on direction as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He rejoined his father as a co-pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church. Shortly before his departure from Montgomery, Alabama, King preached at First Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. He began his sermon by admitting, "I am first and foremost a preacher and on Sunday I want to hear, and preach, a sermon on the Gospel. At the same time, I feel that many of you are here because of your concern with and interest in this great problem of segregation." He continued by saying that he would try to do both.¹

King was, like his father, committed to a pastoral practice grounded in biblical teachings and the current needs and social environment of his parishioners. Martin Luther King, Sr., regularly spoke out against racism from his pulpit at Ebenezer and actively worked for voting rights and desegregation as a minister. He explained in an autobiography, "My ministry has never been otherworldly...solely oriented toward life after death. It has been equally concerned with the here and the now, with improving man's lot in this life. I have therefore stressed the social gospel."²

²Martin Luther King Sr., "A Black Rebel: The Autobiography of M. L. King, Sr. As Told to Edward A. Jones" (unpublished manuscript, 1973), pp. 64, 23. This synthesis of scriptural preaching and an engagement with pressing social issues has, for the last century, been known as the social gospel, a school of thought in mainstream Protestantism which professes that salvation includes the righting of social wrongs in a collective as well as individual way. This view provided a moral basis for social reform in the early twentieth century and found its institutional expression in the mainly white National Council of Churches. This faith in the collective redemption of the social order was also found in the African American church.
What was not apparent was whether King, Jr. came to embrace this manner of preaching early in his career. Until recently, no concrete evidence existed to either support or refute this notion as few King sermons existed from his ministry prior to the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955–1956. While scholars such as Keith Miller and Richard Lischer have used King's later sermons to suggest what his early homilies may have communicated, little was known about King's early homiletic expressions and scholars could only speculate as to their contents.  

In 1997 King Papers Project director Clayborne Carson obtained a substantial body of such materials. Mrs. Coretta Scott King granted the King Papers Project permission to examine papers kept in boxes in the basement of the home that became the King residence in 1965 and to identify items that were appropriate for the Project's mission. The most significant discovery resulting from this exploration was a private file of sermon materials King kept in his study. A battered cardboard box held over two hundred folders containing handwritten outlines, drafts, and prayers as well as academic papers, published articles, and correspondence. The heart of the collection was a trove of sermon notes, outlines, and full texts mainly from the years prior to 1956. Some were jotted on the lined paper that students use for their class notes; some were scribbled on the backs of letters and of travel itineraries; some were neatly typed and dated.

When the King Papers Project received these papers, its editorial staff had already published Volumes I through III of The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., which dealt with the documentation of King's life through his experiences during the Montgomery bus boycott. Volumes IV and V, which covered 1957–1960, were already in progress. Since the sermon material went back to King's earliest days as a preacher at his father's church, managing editor Susan Carson recommended that the Project create a thematic volume, Volume VI: Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948–March 1963, that would explore his development as a preacher and continue the chronology with Volume VII. This evolution was separate from his theological maturation and that as a political figure, yet inextricably linked to them both. To ensure that each document would be properly annotated from a religious perspective, Carson brought on Gerald L. Smith, a professor of history and African American Studies at the University of Kentucky and University of

Kentucky history doctoral student, Rev. Troy Smith.

King’s early handwritten sermon notes and sermons would be compared with later written versions of his homilies, audiotapes of complete sermons, and the published sermons in his 1963 homiletic volume, *Strength to Love*. This volume also includes transcriptions of tape recordings of King’s most famous sermons, such as “Paul’s Letter to American Christians” and “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life.”¹ The transcriptions, however, must be read in the context of King’s oral presentation style. King’s voice, initially low and measured, resounds in these audiotapes as he moves into the body of his sermon, elaborating his theme. His cadence becomes louder and more emphatic as the sermon progresses toward a conclusion. Some listeners responded to King’s message with shouts of encouragement, urging him to “Preach!” and endorsing his line of thought with a “Yes!” or an “Oh, Lord!” King often responded to his audience. These transcriptions of recorded sermons and audience responses convey King at the height of his oratorical power, bring the outlines and sermon notes to life, and provide a basis of comparison between his sermon drafts and delivered sermons.

The early material includes sermons that contain traditional homiletic content—notes, outlines, and fragments addressing traditional themes often heard on Sunday mornings. King wrote “The Assurance of Immortality,” “Repentance,” “The Meaning of Forgiveness,” “What Shall We Do To Be Saved?” and “God the Inescapable” in his early attempts at preaching themes. His early sermons as an associate pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church during the vacation months from seminary included topics on the conflict between good and evil in the human soul (“Human Tension”), typical attempts to evade responsibility and their consequences (“A Way Out”), and a sermon urging empathy as a means to understanding and peace (“I Sat Where They Sat”). King’s desire to reflect on everyday moral questions are evident in these sermons.⁵

However, even in these early years, King also clearly preached sermons that addressed social concerns and race issues. At the end of his 1949 sermon “Civilization’s Great Need,” one that called on the congregation to


⁵For a sampling of these early sermon outlines, see the section “Undated Homiletic Material” in *Papers 6*:559–600.
“rediscover the moral and spiritual ends for living,” he offered the following prayer: “Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color.”6 His sermon “Mastering Our Evil Selves,” delivered in that summer, addressed the complex nature of human sin by discussing racial prejudice:

The average white southerner is not bad. He goes to church every Sunday. He worships the same God we worship. He will send thousands of dollars to Africa and China for the missionary effort. Yet at the same time He will spend millions of dollars in an attempt to keep the Negro segregated and discriminated. Yes, we must admit that there is something contradictory and paradoxical about human nature.

King did not hesitate to denounce Americans’ tendency to issue blanket criticism’s of the Soviet Union and yet refuse to turn a similar gaze on the failings of their own society. In “Splinters and Planks,” based on the biblical passage Matthew 7:3 and also given in the summer of 1949, King maintained:

We dwell on the fact that Communism denies the existence of God. And so our criticisms of Russia go on ad infinitum. But when we turn the coin to the other side the picture is quite different. We never find ourselves seeing the weaknesses of America. I am not at all saying that there are not some weaknesses in the Russian form of government. I must admit that it does not appeal to me directly. But have we not failed to see the gigantic planks in our eyes. While we see the splinters in Russia’s eye we fail to see the great plank of racial segregation and [discrimination] which is blocking the progress of America.

He went on to observe that “Negroes see the splinters in the white man’s eye and fail to see the planks in their own eye.”7

The church did not escape King’s censure. In a school paper whose theme may have been inspired by the title of Harry Emerson Fosdick’s 1933 book on Christianity, The Hope of the World, King wondered, “Is the Church

6In Papers 6:87.
the Hope of the World?” He wrote,

It is a common saying in religious circles that the church is the hope of the world. This question inevitably leads the objective mind to a bit of doubt. He immediately asks, “how can the church be the hope of the world when it is the most reactionary institution in society.” In other words, the church is suppose to be the most radical opposer of the status quo in society, yet, in many instances, it is the greatest preserver of the status quo. So it was very easy for slavery to receive a religious sanction. The church is one of the chief exponents of racial bigotry. Monopoly capitalism has always received the sanction of the church.8

While he did identify social and moral problems in his sermons and pointed out the shortcomings of the congregation members, the church as an institution, and American culture in his sermons, he was also optimistic about the outcome of history. King was fond of a quote from William Cullun Bryant’s poem “The Battlefield,” “Truth crushed to earth will rise again,” and often linked it with a stanza from James Russell Lowell’s poem, “The Present Crisis”:

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne.
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown
Stands God, within the shadows,
Keeping watch above His own.9

King’s confidence in the progress of the human spirit and of God’s hand as a positive force in history marked his sermons with a stamp of hopefulness.

Most significantly, in a school paper for the class Preaching Ministry during his first term at Crozer, he articulated his own vision of his ministry.

Above all I see the preaching ministry as a duel process. On the one hand I must attempt to change the soul of individuals so that their societies may be changed. On the other I must

During his first term at Crozer Theological Seminary, King submitted this handwritten outline for the course Preaching Ministry of the Church. Preaching Ministry reveals King's early commitment to addressing social issues as part of his duties as a preacher.
attempt to change the societies so that the individual soul will have a chance. Therefore, I must be concerned about unemployment, slums, and economic insecurity. I am a profound advocate of the social gospel.  

King recognized that there was a reciprocal relationship between the redemption of an individual soul and the condition of the world in which the soul resided.

King's reliance on a firm foundation of social-gospel rhetoric was a consistent thread that ran through his years of preaching. This optimism in social action and change was tempered with a neo-orthodox belief in the presence of evil in the world and the common human experience of sin as evidenced by racism and prejudice, militarism and warfare, capitalism and materialism, and colonialism's oppression overseas in Africa and Asia.

King borrowed extensively from other preachers such as the aforementioned Fosdick and his successor at New York's Riverside Church, Robert McCracken; King's mentor, Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays; and George Buttrick. King's own sermons are littered with literary references, biblical interpretations, and quotations found in these ministers' work, widely published and often heard on the radio. He actively drew on the ideas of such renowned preachers, recasting their messages to reflect the needs and concerns of the African American community as well as his own sentiments. King also referred to the books in his personal study for his sermons, annotating some of these volumes with notes for his homilies.

King drew on his early sermons repeatedly. "What Is Man?" a sermon theme originally developed during his seminary years, appeared in King's definitive volume of sermons in 1963, Strength to Love. Similarly, he delivered

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11 "We must not become so complacent that we forget the struggles of other minorities. We must unite with other oppressed minorities throughout the world." King, "The Peril of Superficial Optimism in the Area of Race Relations," 19 June 1955 in Papers 6:215.
12 Robert J. McCracken succeeded Harry Emerson Fosdick as pastor of New York's Riverside Church in 1946 and served until 1967. Frederick M. Meek presided over Boston's Old South Church from 1946 until 1973. George Buttrick pastored Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church for twenty-eight years, beginning in 1927, and was best known for his 1928 book, The Parables of Jesus.
13 For a catalog of books kept in King's study that were relevant to his sermon preparation, see King's Personal Library: Selected Works, in Papers 6:829–35.
the homily he preached as his trial sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in January 1954 regularly throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. King mainly preached from outlines versus fully written sermon texts, as his wife Coretta Scott King noted in her autobiography. His sermon file contains mainly outlines and brief notes that King jotted down before stepping up to the pulpit.

Recently, as is widely known, the content of King’s sermon file and other materials were sold by the King family. These documents were housed at Sotheby’s in New York for almost five years. During that time, Sotheby’s Vice Chairman of Print and Manuscript Americana, David Redden, and Vice President of Books and Manuscripts, Elizabeth Muller, generously gave the King Papers editorial staff access to these documents, enabling us to confirm an inventory of the sermon file, verify transcriptions, and obtain document scans to be used as facsimiles in Volume VI. Advocate of the Social Gospel will be the first chance that scholars and the public have to study the contents of this valuable collection.

In conclusion, King’s sermon file provided the missing links that established the basis and the trajectory of King’s social gospel ministry. These documents definitively demonstrate that the social gospel was the abiding foundation for his sermonic practice. King’s devotion to the social gospel shaped not only his role as a pastor but his demeanor as a civil rights leader as portions of many of these sermons found their way into his civil rights speeches, such as “I Have a Dream.” These sermons provide a contribution to the history of King, the civil rights movement, and U.S. religious history. In the midst of the American Century, one regarded as unabashedly secular, King’s sermons also point to the central role of spirituality and religious faith in this period.