night of man’s inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice. And this will be the day when we will be able to sing by the grace of God, the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever. Hallelujah, Hallelujah 19

[sustained applause]

At RRL-VrRUT

19 King quotes excerpts from the “Hallelujah Chorus” of Handel’s oratorio Messiah (1741), see also Revelation 11:15

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

“The Christian Doctrine of Man,” Sermon Delivered at the Detroit Council of Churches’ Noon Lenten Services


On 1 March 1957 Detroit Council of Churches executive director G. Merrill Lenox invited King to preach during the Council’s 1958 Noon Lenten series 1 This was the third sermon that King delivered during that series 2 He encourages the congregation to adopt a “realistic” view of humanity, by recognizing that man is “a biological being, injected with spirit, made in the image of God.” However, he charges that “man has misused his freedom” and laments, “We deal with problems today just as people dealt with them two thousand years ago. We go to the battlefield to solve our problems. The only difference is that we are progressively evil. People two thousand years ago used to kill you with bow and arrows, we do it now with atomic bombs.” The following text is taken from an audio recording of the service

I would like to take just a moment to say what a great spiritual experience this has been for me. And I want to express my personal appreciation to each of you for your kind expressions and for your cooperative spirits. I will remember these three days for many, many years to come. Now, I am also grateful to Doctor Lenox and the

1 King agreed to the offer in a 24 April 1957 letter, this was his first appearance. The Noon Lenten series, initiated in 1920, featured nationally renowned ministers and broadcast their sermons on Detroit radio station WWJ. The 1957 series included preachers such as Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays, James Albert Pike of St. John the Divine Cathedral, and radio minister Ralph Sockman. King would also preach during the 1961 Noon Lenten Services (see King, The Man Who Was a Fool, 6 March 1961 and Loving Your Enemies, 7 March 1961, pp. 411–419 and 421–429 in this volume, respectively).

Detroit Council of Churches for extending the invitation. I have been deeply impressed with the Council here and the great work that is being done by Dr. Lenox and his staff. I am familiar with most of the church councils across the country, and I can say that the Detroit Council is the most active Council of Churches that I know about in anywhere in this country. And this is due to the great work, the unselfish labor, of Dr. Lenox and his staff, and I want to express my appreciation to them for this great and noble work. And I hope you will continue to cooperate with the Council here in the great work for the kingdom of God. I cannot close these introductory remarks without saying that it gives me a great deal of humility to stand in the pulpit, occupied from Sunday to Sunday by Dr. Henry Hitt Crane. By all standards of measurement, Dr. Crane is one of the great preachers of our age, and if there is any man anywhere in this world who is a Christian, it's Henry Hitt Crane. So it is a great honor to stand in this spot today and all of the three days.

This afternoon I would like to talk about "The Christian Doctrine of Man." I guess you wonder why one would be talking about man during the Lenten season, but it is important for us to know who we are—to know what Jesus thought about man. The cross reveals two basic things it seems to me. On the one hand, it is a revelation of the amazing heights to which man can ascend by the grace of God. On the other hand, it is an expression of the tragic and demonic depths to which man can sink. The question, What is man? is one of the most important questions confronting any generation. The whole political, social, and economic structure of a society is largely determined by its answer to this pressing question. Indeed, the conflict which we witness in the world today between totalitarianism and democracy is at bottom a conflict over the question, What is man?

In our generation, the asking of this question has risen to heightening proportions. But although there is widespread agreement in asking the question, there is fantastic disagreement in answering it. For instance, there are those who think of man as a pretty low creature. For them, he's little more than a misguided animal. We

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3 Henry Hitt Crane (1902–1977) served as pastor of Detroit's Central Methodist Church from 1938 to 1958.
4 King had filled Central Methodist's pulpit the previous year during the church's summer preaching series and would be a regular participant in the summer series in the coming years (Program, Sunday services, 18 August 1957, Central Methodist Church, Announcement, "Summer preaching program," 6 July–7 September 1958, King, Loving Your Enemies, Sermon delivered at Central Methodist Church, 23 August 1959, Central Methodist Church, Announcement, "Summer preaching program," 26 June–4 September 1960). Like the Noon Lenten series, Central Methodist's summer series featured prominent ministers and spokespersons, such as George Buttrick and Norman Thomas.
6 In the published version of this sermon, King elaborated that "the conflict we witness between totalitarianism and democracy is fundamentally centered on this: Is man a person or a pawn? Is he a cog in the wheel of the state or a free, creative being capable of accepting responsibility?" (Strength to Love, p. 87).
may refer to these persons as the pessimistic naturalists. Some of them would cry out that man is the supreme clown of creation. Another would say that man is a cosmic accident—a disease on this planet not soon to be cured. Another would say that man is the most pernicious little race of ominous vermin that nature ever suffered to walk across the face of the earth. These people don’t see very much in him. And when I’m speaking of man at this point, I must make it clear that I’m not talking about the male sex; this is gender in its setting including men and women.

There are those on the other hand who would lift man to almost idealistic proportions and almost to the level of a god. And so they would cry out with Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “What a piece of work is man, how noble in faculty, how infinite in reason, in form and moving how express and admirable. In apprehension, how like a god, in action how like an angel. The beauty of the world; the paragon of animals.”

There are others who seek to be realistic in the doctrine of man. They see something of a strange dualism, a dichotomy, a split-up in man, a mixture. And so they would cry out with Carlyle that there are depths in man which go down to the lowest hell and heights which reach the highest heaven. For are not both heaven and hell made out of Him, everlasting miracle and mystery that He is. One day the Psalmist looked out, he noticed the vastness of the cosmic order. He noticed the stars as they bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity. He noticed the moon as it stood in all of its scintillating beauty, and he says, “Now in the midst of all of this, what is man?” He has an answer. He comes out and says, “Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor.”

The more modern translations—the Moffatt, the Goodspeed, and the Revised Standard Version—which say, “Thou hast made him a little less than God, Thou hast made him a little less than divine.” This is the realistic approach. And I think it was this realistic approach that King expanded on in his published version of this sermon.

In the published version of this sermon, King expanded on this point: “Those who think of man purely in materialistic terms argue that man is simply an animal, a tiny object in the vast, ever-changing organism called nature, which is wholly unconscious and impersonal. His whole life may be explained in terms of matter in motion. Such a system of thought affirms that the conduct of man is physically determined and that the mind is merely an effect of the brain.” (Strength to Love, p. 87)

C S Lewis, Answers to Questions on Christianity, p. 10

Jonathan Swift, Gulliver’s Travels (1726)

At this point in the published version, King wrote: “Humanism is another answer frequently given to the question, ‘What is man?’ Believing neither in God nor in the existence of any supernatural power, the humanist affirms that man is the highest form of being which has evolved in the natural universe.” (Strength to Love, pp. 87–88)

Shakespeare, Hamlet, act 2, sc 2

In the published version, King wrote: “There are those who, seeking to be a little more realistic about man, wish to reconcile the truths of these opposites, while avoiding the extremes of both. They contend that the truth about man is found neither in the thesis of pessimistic materialism nor the antithesis of optimistic humanism, but in a higher synthesis. Man is neither villain nor hero, he is rather both villain and hero.” (Strength to Love, p. 88)

Thomas Carlyle, The French Revolution (1837)

Cf. Psalm 8:4–5, Psalm 8:5 in The New Testament of Our Lord and Savor Jesus Christ, Revised Standard Version (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1946), citations of biblical verses from this translation are noted as RSV, in parentheses

Cf. Psalm 8:5 (GOODSPEED) and Psalm 8:6 (MOFFATT)
course that Jesus followed in his thinking about man. For he saw man in his whole being as that being with great possibilities for goodness and also possibilities for evil.

Now let us take this realistic approach and try to work out the Christian doctrine of man. Let us begin by stating something that is very obvious, and that is, man is a biological being with a physical body. I guess this is why the Psalmist can say, "Thou hast made him a little less than God, a little less than divine." You see when we think of God, we don't think of a being with a body, we don't think of a being with a nervous system in any biological sense. We don't think of a being with hands in any physical sense. We think of God as a being of pure spirit. But man, that being a little less than God, has a body, he's in nature. And he can never totally disown his kinship from animated nature. The facts in favor of the theory of evolution are so conclusive that to deny them would mean standing in the face of the most obvious evidence. Man is a biological being with a material body. Now the Bible said God made him that way, and since God made him that way it must be good because when we turn over in the book of Genesis we read everything that God makes is good, so there is nothing wrong with having a body—nothing wrong with it.

And this is one of the things that distinguishes the Christian doctrine of man from the Greek doctrine. The Greeks under the impetus of Plato felt that the body was something inherently depraved, inherently evil, and that somehow the soul could not reach its full maturity until it had broken loose from the prison of the body. But this was never the Christian doctrine. The Christian doctrine did not consider the body as the principle of evil. Christianity says the will is the principle of evil. And so in Christianity the body is sacred. The body is significant. This means that in any Christian doctrine of man we must forever be concerned about man's physical well-being. Jesus was concerned about that. He realized that men had to have certain physical necessities. One day he said, "Man cannot live by bread alone." But the mere fact that the "alone" was added means that Jesus realized that man could not live without bread. (Yes) So as a minister of the gospel, I must not only preach to men and women to be good, but I must be concerned about the social conditions that often make them bad. (Yeah) It's not enough for me to tell men to be honest, but I must be concerned about the economic conditions that make them dishonest. (Amen) I must be concerned about the poverty in the world. I must be concerned about the ignorance in the world. I must be concerned about the slums in the world. (Amen) It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but I must be concerned about the new Detroit, the new New York, the new Atlanta. (Amen, Tell it) It's all right to think of a city and the street flowing with milk and honey, but religion must be concerned about those streets in this world where individuals go to bed hungry at night. (Right, Amen) And any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and fails to be concerned about the economic conditions that corrupt them, the social conditions that damn them, the city governments that cripple them, is a dry, dead, do-nothing religion in need of new blood. (Amen) And it justly deserves the criticism of the Marxists as nothing
but an opiate of the people. Because it fails to see one basic fact—that man is a biological being with a physical body.

But we can’t stop here in the doctrine of man. Some people stop right here. Marxism would stop right here. Communism would stop right here and say that man is made merely for collective profit, so to speak. The whole economic interpretation of history is the way it looks at it. There are those who would stop right here—the naturalistic and materialistic thinkers. Man is little more than an animal for these thinkers. Some years ago a group of chemists who had a flair for statistics decided to work out in terms of the market values of that particular day the worth of man—the worth of his bodily makeup. And after they had worked several days and several weeks, they came out with this conclusion: that the average man has enough fat in him to make about seven bars of soap, enough iron to make a medium-size nail, enough lime to whitewash a chicken coop, enough sugar to fill a shaker, enough phosphorous to make about twenty-two hundred match tips, and enough magnesia for a dose of magnesium, and a little sulphur. And when all of this was added up in the market values of that day it came to ninety-eight cents. That’s all you could get out of man’s bodily stuff, his bodily makeup. Now, the standards of living are higher now, and I guess maybe you could get a dollar ninety-eight cents for the average man. But think of this man’s bodily makeup being worth only ninety-eight cents, that’s it. But can you explain the literary genius of Shakespeare in terms of ninety-eight cents? Can you explain the artistic genius of Michelangelo in terms of ninety-eight cents? Can you explain the musical genius of Beethoven in terms of ninety-eight cents? Can you explain the spiritual genius of Jesus of Nazareth in terms of ninety-eight cents? Can you explain the mystery of the human soul and the map of the human heart in terms of ninety-eight cents? (Oh, no) Oh, no. There is something within man that cannot be calculated in terms of dollars and cents. There is something within man that cannot be reduced to biological terms. Man is more than a tiny vagary of whirling electrons or a wisp of smoke from a limitless smoldering. Man is a child of God.

And therefore we must bring into a Christian doctrine of man this second point. Man is a being of spirit. He has a mind, he has rational capacity, he can think. And this is what distinguishes man from his animal ancestry. This is his uniqueness. As you look out through nature it seems that mind and matter run on two parallel lines, but when it comes to man, they intersect. And this is man’s uniqueness. He’s in nature and yet above nature. He’s in time and yet above time. And this is what makes him different. This is what the Psalmist means when he says, “Thou hast, hath crowned him with glory and honor.” This is what Jesus sees within man when he talks about

18 King cites Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” Introduction (1844).
19 In the published version, King expanded on this idea: “The Marxists, for instance, following a theory of dialectical materialism, contend that man is merely a producing animal who supplies his own needs and whose life is determined largely by economic forces” (Strength to Love, p. 89).
20 Cf. Fosdick, Successful Christian Living, pp. 265-266.
21 Regarding man’s rational capacity, King added in the published version: “He moves up ‘the stairs of his concepts’ into a wonder world of thought. Conscience speaks to him, and he is reminded of things divine” (Strength to Love, p. 90).
the great heights to which man can ascend. Man is a being of spirit. He can think a poem and write it, he can think a symphony and compose it, he can think up a great civilization and go out and create it. This is man. He's God's marvelous creation. And because he has rational capacity you can't quite hem him in. He has a mind, and he can't be limited by his body. You can take his body if you please and put it in Bedford's prison, but pretty soon his mind will break out through the bars (Amen) and come back and scratch across the pages of history. A Pilgrim's Progress. You can bring him down in his wretched old age, and his body's all but worn out, vision all but gone, but in the midst of that, in the person of a [George Frideric] Handel, he can look up and imagine that he hears the angels singing and come back and scratch across the pages of history a "Hallelujah Chorus" (Amen, Yeah) You just can't hold him down (Yeah) Man is God's marvelous creation (Amen, Yeah) Somehow he can leap oceans, break through walls, transcend the categories of time and space. The stars may be marvelous, but not as marvelous as the mind of man that comprehended them. Man is made to have dominion over the things of the world. There's another thing that comes under this point, and that is man is made in the image of God. The biblical writers mean. They mean that somehow man has a capacity—the unique capacity—to have fellowship with God. He has rational capacity, and therefore there is something within man that is god-like—he can have communion with Him (Amen)

I must rush on to bring about another basic point that must stand out in any Christian doctrine of man. He is a biological being, injected with spirit, made in the image of God, but some of that image is gone. Man is free and I don't have time to go into that. We just accept that as a presupposition that man can choose between alternatives. He isn't guided by instinct as the lower animals merely. But he's free. He can choose between the high and the low, the good and the evil. But man has misused his freedom. And so there is that other point that must stand out in any Christian doctrine of man. And that is, man is a sinner in need of God's grace (Yes, Amen). We don't like to hear this. We hate to recognize the fact that we are sinners. But what does this Lenten season reveal to us other than the fact that we are sinners in need of God's grace—in need of repentance. Oh, we try to get by it, and we try to call it different names, and we bring into being the new psychology; and we try to use that to get by this term "sin." We say it's inner conflicts, we say it's phobias...
we say the conflict is between what the psychologist [Sigmund] Freud would call the id and the superego. But when we look at ourselves hard enough, we come to see that the conflict is between God and man. There is something within all of us that causes us to cry out with Ovid the Latin poet, "I see and approve the better things of life, but the evil things I do." There is something within all of us that causes us to cry out with Plato that "the personality is like a charioteer with two headstrong horses each wanting to go in different directions." There is something in all of us that causes us to cry out with Saint Augustine, "Lord make me pure, but not yet." There is something within all of us that causes us to agree with the apostle Paul, "The good that I would I do not, the evil that I would not that I do."

This is man's plight. Somehow the "isness" of our present natures is out of harmony with the eternal "oughtness" that forever confronts us. So we are sinners. It isn't because we don't know. We know truth, and yet we lie. (Right on) We know how to be honest and yet we are dishonest. (Yeah, Amen) We know how to be just and yet we are unjust. We are unfaithful to those that we should be faithful to, we are disloyal to those that we should be loyal to. (Amen) We like sheep have gone astray. (Amen, Yeah) When I look at myself hard enough, I don't feel like crying out, "Lord I thank thee that I'm not like other men," but I find myself crying out, "God be merciful unto me a sinner." And we see this sinfulness of man bounding through the universe. Because of our sinfulness we have come to the point, producing an age of guided missiles and misguided men. We have allowed our civilization to outdistance our culture. The means by which we live outdistance the ends for which we live. And when it comes to our collective life, our sinfulness is even greater. As individuals we are sinful but when we interact in society, it becomes even greater. One theologian looking at this problem could write a book, Moral Man and Immoral Society. Oh, when society becomes a reality before us we see sin in all of its glaring dimensions. People tend to think sometimes that we are evolving to a better height, or we are getting better inevitably, but I don't know about that. We deal with problems today just as people dealt with them two thousand years ago. We go to the battlefield to solve our problems. The only difference is that we are progressively evil. People two thousand years ago used to kill you with bow and arrows, we do it now with atomic bombs. (Yeah, Amen) And somehow we find ourselves in this state of sinfulness. One racial group tramples over another racial group with the iron feet of oppression. (Yeah) One nation tramples over another nation with injustice and...
evil and all that we can think of. We leave the battlefields of the world painted with blood, stack up national debts higher than mountains of gold, send men home psychologically deranged and physically handicapped, and fill our nations with orphans and widows. (Yeah, Amen) When we look at our collective life, we must cry out, "We are sinners. (Yeah, Amen, Sinners) We need to repent."

This afternoon as I come to my conclusion, there is still a voice crying out, "Repent. The kingdom of God is at hand." (Yeah, Amen) And as we stand in this season of the year, this is the hour that we should repent. Let us come to see that man isn't made for the low places. Man is made for the stars, created for the everlasting, born for eternity. Jesus revealed to us that we are made for that which is high, noble, and good. (Amen) And we must go out and seek it at every moment. There is a boy, who goes up to his father and says, "Father, give me my goods." And we see that boy walking down the road, going to a far country. After being there a while—wasting his substance, wasting his life, wasting all—a famine breaks out. And he ends up in a hog's pen. That parable tells us something. It says to us that man is not made for the far country of evil, and as long as he finds himself going there he will end up frustrated, bewildered, and disillusioned. Every time man goes to the far country of evil, a famine breaks out. (Amen, Yeah, Amen) And what is the new, what can we consider the neurotic tendencies of our times—the frustration, the fears, and the suspicions—but expressions of the famine that has broken out in our world because we have separated ourselves from God? (Yeah, Amen)

But that parable doesn't end there. It said one day that boy came to himself. And when he came to himself he decided to rise up. And somehow we can see him as he...
says to himself, “I have a father back home. I have a father back home with food and other things to spare. I’m not made for this. I’m not made to dwell here. I will rise up and go back to my father.” We can see him walking up the dusty road that he had once come down. Had a little speech and he had practiced this speech and he had planned to make it. But you know the beautiful thing is that he never did get a chance to make that speech. (Amen) Before he could get home, there was a father there waiting with outstretched arms (Amen, Yeah), saying, “Come home and I will accept you.” And he runs down the road to meet him.

This is what happens any time that man decides to rise up. This is what happens any time a nation or an individual decides to rise up. The God of the universe stands there in all of His love and forgiving power saying, “Come home (Yeah, Amen, Amen) Western civilization, you have strayed away into the far country of colonialism and imperialism. You have taken one billion six hundred million of your brothers in Asia and Africa, dominated them politically, exploited them economically, segregated and humiliated them. You have trampled over them. But western civilization, if you will rise up now and come out of this far country of imperialism and colonialism and come on back to your true home, which is freedom and justice, I’ll take you in. (Yeah, Oh amen) America, I had great intentions for you. I had planned for you to be this great nation where all men would live together as brothers—a nation of religious freedom, a nation of racial freedom. And America, you wrote it in your Declaration of Independence. You meant well, for you cried out, ‘All men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights (Yeah) Among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ (Preach) But in the midst of your creed, America, you’ve strayed away to the far country of segregation and discrimination (Say it, Amen) You’ve taken sixteen million of your brothers, trampled over them, mistreated them, inflicted them with tragic injustices and indignities. 41 But America, I’m not going to give you up. If you will rise up out of the far country of segregation and discrimination (Amen), I will take you in, America (Amen, Amen) And I will bring you back to your true home.” (Amen)

And when a nation decides to do that, when an individual decides to do that, somehow the morning stars will sing together (Amen, Yeah), and the sons of God will shout for joy (Yeah, Amen)

To every man there openeth a way and ways and a way
The high soul climbs the high way And the low soul gropes the low
And in between on the misty flats, the rest drift to and fro
But to every man there openeth a high and a low way
Every man decideth which way his soul shall go 42

God grant that under the spirit of Jesus the Christ you will choose a high way (Amen, Lord) Eternal God our Father, we thank Thee for the inspiration of Jesus

41 King used different language in the published version of this sermon "In the far country of segregation and discrimination, you have oppressed nineteen million of your Negro brothers, binding them economically and driving them into the ghetto, and you have stripped them of their self-respect and self-dignity, making them feel that they are nobodies" (Strength to Love, p 92)

42 King quotes John Oxenharn’s poem “The Ways” (1916)
3 June 1958

(Amen) Grant that we will follow His way and recognize that we are made for the high places (Amen) And grant that we will rise up out of the low, far countries of evil and return to the father’s house And now unto Him who is able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless before our father’s throne, to Him be power and authority, majesty and dominion, now, henceforth, and forevermore Amen

At MDCC-MiDW-AL

Paul’s Letter to American Christians,
Sermon Delivered to the Commission on Ecumenical Missions and Relations,
United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.

[3 June 1958]
[Pittsburgh, Pa]

King began to deliver versions of this sermon, written as early as 1956, as national speaking opportunities increased. He uses the form of a New Testament Pauline epistle to challenge the American church, as Frederick Meek had done previously in his “A Letter to Christians.” King preached the following version at the inaugural convention of the newly established United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. He assumes Paul’s voice and questions whether Americans’ “spiritual progress has been commensurate with your scientific progress.” King warns the gathered Presbyterian leaders against racial segregation within their church as well as the schisms and “narrow sectarianism” within Protestantism that threatens to destroy “the unity of the body of Christ.” He concludes by urging those involved in the struggle for justice, white as well as black, to remain nonviolent and to grow in their capacity for love, even for the oppressor. The following text is taken from an audio recording of the address.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished platform associates, ladies and gentlemen, I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here this morning and to be a part of this very rich fellowship. I want to express my personal appreciation to the Board of Missions for extending this invitation and making it possible for me to share in this

1 Charles W. Kelly, pastor emeritus of Tuskegee’s Greenwood Missionary Baptist Church, extolled King’s 7 September 1956 delivery of this sermon at the seventy-sixth annual meeting of the National Baptist Convention in Denver, writing “You spoke as a prophet and see which you are — The imaginative ‘Letter from St. Paul’ to American Xns was as vivid and real as any of the Pauline Epistles” (Kelly to King, 8 September 1956, in Papers 3:366). King preached a nearly identical version of this sermon at Dexter the following November (King, “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 4 November 1956, in Papers 3:414–420). Between 1956 and 1962, he delivered this sermon at least fifteen times.

2 King annotated a copy of Meek’s homily “A Letter to Christians” and kept it in his sermon file (“A Letter to Christians, A sermon preached in Old South Church in Boston,” 21 February 1954).