

MARTIN LUTHER KING'S LIBERAL CHRISTIANITY  
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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Turning water into wine?<sup>i</sup> Is the point here that Jesus is a miracle-worker? Or that Jesus is biblically imaged as one who shows to the wedding goers, and ultimately to the world, unprecedented hospitality, attention to the needs of others, and eagerness to celebrate the good things of life? I believe that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would reject the first explanation of miracle and come down solidly on the side of the second interpretation. As today's reading from Psalm 36<sup>ii</sup> asserts, the law of the universe is steadfast love, and ultimately the hope is that all people will feast on the abundance of God's house and drink from the river of God's delights.

Tomorrow is our national holiday for Martin Luther King, Jr. and today is our interdenominational Christian celebration of his life here in the Stanford Memorial Church. I've been shocked to learn that there are Stanford students don't know that Dr. King, as they usually refer to him, was a Christian minister. But he was -- as was his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, only brother, and an uncle.<sup>iii</sup> He always pastored or co-pastored a church in his adult life.<sup>iv</sup> It's his kind of Christianity that I want to talk about today. There are many aspects of his life and work that are critical for all of us to know about and to commemorate, including his civil rights leadership,

his commitment to nonviolence and pacifism, and his advocacy for the poor of all racial and ethnic backgrounds in America and around the world. I've spoken of each of these at the time of the national holiday in the past, as has my colleague, the Rev. John Harrison. But today I'd like to remember and celebrate something that hasn't much been discussed in this church in my memory – Martin Luther King's liberal Christianity.

King wrote about his early life that “The lessons which I was taught in Sunday school were quite in the fundamentalist line. None of my teachers doubted the infallibility of the Scriptures. Most of them were unlettered and had never heard of biblical criticism. Naturally, I accepted the teachings as they were being given to me...But this uncritical attitude could not last long, for it was contrary to the very nature of my being... At the age of thirteen, I shocked my Sunday school class by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Doubts began to spring forth unrelentingly.”<sup>v</sup>

He explains that it was in college “that the shackles of fundamentalism were [finally] removed from my body... I could not see how many of the facts of science could be squared with religion... I had been brought up in the church and knew about religion, but I wondered whether it could serve as a vehicle to modern thinking, whether religion could be intellectually respectable as well as emotionally satisfying.” As King notes, “I revolted, too, against the emotionalism of much Negro religion, the shouting and stamping. I didn't understand it, and it embarrassed me.”<sup>vi</sup>

In seminary he says he became “a thoroughgoing liberal. Liberalism provided me with an intellectual satisfaction that I could never find in fundamentalism...[including becoming] convinced of the natural goodness of man and the natural power of human reason.”<sup>vii</sup> So, what exactly did Christian fundamentalism and Christian liberalism mean to Martin Luther King, Jr.? We should remember that there are five basic principles of fundamentalism, as stated in a series of pamphlets entitled *The Fundamentals*, distributed free to ministers and lay people across the country from 1909 through 1915, based on doctrines developed by professors at Princeton Theological Seminary. They are: the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth of Jesus, the salvation of humankind by Jesus’s atoning sacrifice on the cross, his bodily resurrection, and his ability to perform miracles.<sup>viii</sup> Martin Luther King believed in none of these. Here are some of his thoughts on each:<sup>ix</sup>

1) “The Bible [is] not a textbook written with divine hands, but...a portrayal of the experiences of men written in particular historical situations.”<sup>x</sup>

2) ”[Regarding the virgin birth, to] the modern scientific mind...it seems...impossible for anyone to be born without a human father...[Moreover] the earliest written documents in the New Testament make no mention of the virgin birth...The effort to justify this doctrine on the grounds that it was predicted by the prophet Isaiah is immediately eliminated, for all New Testament scholars agree that the word virgin is not found in the Hebrew original, but only in the Greek text which is a mistranslation of the Hebrew word for “young woman.”<sup>xi</sup>

3) "If Christ by his...[atoning] death paid the full penalty of sin, there is no valid ground for repentance or moral obedience [for the rest of us] as a condition of forgiveness. The debt is paid; the penalty exacted, and there is, consequently, nothing to forgive."<sup>xii</sup>

4) "The resurrection story...from a literary, historical, and philosophical point of view...raises many questions. In fact the external evidence for the authenticity of this doctrine is found wanting."<sup>xiii</sup>

5) "[Regarding miracles] It is certainly justifiable to be as scientific as possible in proving that the whale did not swallow Jonah, that Jesus was not born of a virgin [and so on]."<sup>xiv</sup>

King went further to deny Jesus' identity with God: "To say that the Christ, whose example of living we are bid to follow, is divine...is actually harmful and detrimental. To invest this Christ with such supernatural qualities...[means] 'Oh well, he had a better chance for that kind of life than we can possibly have'.... Christ was to be only the prototype of one among many brothers...[and] This divine quality...was not something thrust upon Jesus from above, but it was a definite achievement [of his] through the process of moral struggle."<sup>xv</sup>

Here are some other theological views of King's that fall within the ambit of his liberal Christianity: "It is obvious that most twentieth century Christians must frankly and flatly reject any view of physical return of Christ... A physical heaven and a physical hell are inconceivable in a Copernican world."<sup>xvi</sup> The "doctrine of original

sin...should be rejected... An image of God ... [leaving man] totally helpless in his desire for salvation...is preposterous.”<sup>xvii</sup>

What always remained compelling for Martin Luther King was liberal Christianity’s “devotion to the search for truth, its insistence on an open and analytical mind, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason...[and its] contribution to the philological-historical criticism of biblical literature [which] has been of immeasurable value and should be defended with religious and scientific passion.”<sup>xviii</sup> However, he also came to see certain weaknesses in liberal theology. It could become “too sentimental concerning human nature...lean toward a false idealism...[and] overlook the fact that reason is darkened by sin.”<sup>xix</sup> Also, liberal Christianity “often loses itself in ‘higher criticism’ ...After the Bible has been stripped of all of its mythological and non-historical content, the liberal theologian must be able to answer the question – what then? ...What relevance do these scriptures have? What moral implications do we find growing out of the Bible? What relevance does Jesus have [today]?”<sup>xx</sup> King goes on to explain that liberal theology can become “lost in a vocabulary...[and] too divorced from life” so that it “fails to answer certain vital questions...and fails to contact the masses.”<sup>xxi</sup>

But King is crystal clear about the relevance of the scriptures for him and the moral implications that grow out of them: “[T]he gospel at its best deals with the whole man – not only his soul but his body; not only his spiritual well-being but his material well-being. Any religion that professes concern for the souls of men and is

not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.”<sup>xxii</sup>

For King, Jesus was the great exemplar and teacher – the one whose model we should follow and in whose footsteps we should walk in living our lives, here and now. Instead of speciously waiting for a physical Second Coming of Christ, that doctrine should mean “that whenever we turn our lives to the highest and best, there for us is the Christ.” King explained that we are celebrating the Second Coming “every time we turn our backs to the low road and accept the high road, every time we say no to self...every time a man or woman turns from ugliness to beauty and is able to forgive even their enemies.”<sup>xxiii</sup> He quipped that “Jesus always recognized that there is a danger of having a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

Christianity for King is not about Jesus’ alleged atoning sacrifice for the sins of humankind; it’s about pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, following Jesus’ example, in an attempt to become full moral and spiritual beings ourselves. Here’s how he put it in his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech:

I accept this award today with an ... audacious faith in the future of mankind. I refuse to accept the idea that the ‘is-ness’ of man’s present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts him. I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life which surrounds him...I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, other-centered men can build up.<sup>xxv</sup>

In a sermon delivered at his church in Atlanta a month before his assassination in 1968, King demonstrated his liberal Christianity's tolerance and openness to the insights of other major world religious and philosophical traditions:

Whenever you set out to build a creative temple, whatever it may be, you must face the fact that there is a tension at the heart of the universe between good and evil. Hinduism refers to this as a struggle between illusion and reality. Platonic philosophy used to refer to it as a tension between body and soul. Zoroastrianism...used to refer to it as a tension between the god of light and the god of darkness. Traditional Judaism and Christianity refer to it as a tension between God and Satan.”

Then, King went on to lay out the basic message of liberal Christianity from his perspective: With Jesus as your guide, do your very best to live a morally and spiritually committed life. I end with his words from that sermon:

“Now not only is that struggle structured out somewhere in the external forces of the universe, it's structured in our own lives... Sigmund Freud used to say that this tension is a tension between what he called the id and the superego... And in every one of us, there's a war going on. It's a civil war... Every time you set out to love, something keeps pulling on you, trying to get you to hate... [T]here are times that all of us know somehow that there is a Mr. Hyde and a Dr. Jekyll in us...

“In the final analysis, God does not judge us by the separate incidents or the separate mistakes that we make, but by the total bent of our lives. In the final analysis, God knows that his children are weak and they are frail. In the final analysis, what God requires is that your heart is right.

“And the question I want to raise with you: is your heart right? If your heart isn't right, fix it up today...Get somebody to be able to say about you: ‘He may not have reached the highest height, he may not have realized all of his dreams, but he tried.’ [S]he tried to be a just [wo]man. He tried to be an honest man. [Her] heart was in the right place.” And I can hear a voice saying, crying out through the eternities, ‘I accept you. You are a recipient of my grace because it was in your heart.’<sup>xxvi</sup>

Amen.

## BENEDICTION

(From the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.) When we see social relationships controlled everywhere by the principles which Jesus illustrated in life – trust, love, mercy, and altruism – then we shall know that the Kingdom of God is here.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

Amen.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> From the story related in today’s lectionary reading from John 2:1-11.

<sup>ii</sup> Psalm 36:5-10.

<sup>iii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson (New York: Warner Books, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>iv</sup> Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Mentor, 1982), p. 142.

<sup>v</sup> King, *Autobiography*, p. 6.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>vii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 35.

<sup>viii</sup> E.R. Sandeen, “Fundamentalist and Evangelical Churches,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: 1978), Vol. 7, pp. 778, 780.

<sup>ix</sup> I am particularly indebted in my understanding of King’s liberal Christianity, and my describing it in this sermon, to an article by Robert James Scofield in the November/December 2009 edition of *Tikkun Magazine* entitled “King’s God: The Unknown Faith of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”

<sup>x</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “How to Use the Bible in Modern Theological Construction,” *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), Vol. 1, p. 78.

<sup>xi</sup> King, “What Experiences of Christians Living in the Early Christian Century Led to the Christian Doctrines of the Divine Sonship of Jesus, the Virgin Birth, and the Bodily Resurrection,” *Papers*, Vol. 1.

<sup>xii</sup> King, “A View of the Cross Possessing Biblical and Spiritual Justification,” *Papers*, Vol. 1, p. 265.

<sup>xiii</sup> King, “What Experiences.”

<sup>xiv</sup> King, “The Weaknesses of Liberal Theology I,” *Papers*, Vol. 6, p. 80.

<sup>xv</sup> King, “The Humanity and Divinity of Jesus,” *Papers*, Vol. 1, p. 150.



- <sup>xvi</sup> King, “The Christian Pertinence of Eschatological Hope,” *Papers*, Vol. 1, p. 269.
- <sup>xvii</sup> King, “How Modern Christians Should Think of Man,” *Papers*, Vol. 1.
- <sup>xviii</sup> King, “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence”, p. 35.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- <sup>xx</sup> King, “The Weaknesses of Liberal Theology I,” Vol. 6, pp. 78, 80.
- <sup>xxi</sup> King, “The Weaknesses of Liberal Theology II,” *Papers*, Vol. 6, p. 80.
- <sup>xxii</sup> King, “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” pp. 37-38.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> King, “Christian Pertinence,” p. 270.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> King, “A Religion of Doing,” *Papers*, Vol. 6, p. 171.
- <sup>xxv</sup> King, Nobel Acceptance speech (1964) as cited in the *Autobiography* edited by Carson, p. 260.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> King, “Unfulfilled Dreams,” a sermon delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta on March 3, 1968, as cited in the *Autobiography* edited by Carson, pp. 356-359.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> King, “Christian Pertinence,” p. 272.