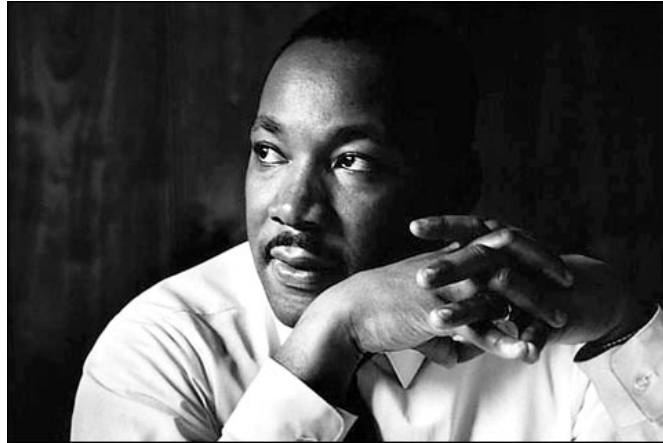


**King's Journey:
Martin Luther King, Twentieth-Century Theological Ethics, and
Luke 4:18-19**

By: Montague Williams



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A Lens for Interpretation
I

In recent days the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. has been re-emphasized as a symbol of social justice. Explicitly, this symbol is now pictured in the mainstream as a dream finally realized through the recent U.S. presidential election. However, the imagination set forth by MLK is not simply one of equalizing positional power between racial groups. It is true that much of his work was done for the sake of such goals. But ecclesologically, his dream must not to be interpreted merely through the trajectories of his policy-making within his government system, but through his journey of life. It would be helpful for us to understand his life and martyrdom in the way the early Christians did when they joined the “apostolic tradition of witness [knowing] that their testimonies and deaths would be written about...”¹ Robin Darling Young says:

Because martyrs bore the name of Christ, they were themselves like letters meant to be read by the community and the world, letters from Christ that were recognizably like Christ... They were also visionaries who transmitted their revelations to their supporters.²

If we trust one of MLK's closest supporters—Coretta Scott King—in her reading of him as a letter, we find a hope that includes racial reconciliation within a wider scope of Biblical justice. In her essay and inaugural address for the Annual Martin Luther King Lectureship at Wesley Theological Seminary in 1970, she says, “The legacy of Martin Luther King was the tactical fulfillment in the United States of America of the charge

¹ Robin Darling Young, *In Procession Before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity*. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 10.

² Ibid.

which Jesus accepted for his ministry and offered to his followers in the reading from Isaiah.”³ She goes on to quote Luke 4:18-19. MLK, himself would not disagree. During his last speech on the eve of his assassination he transmits to a crowd, which apparently included a large amount of church leaders:

We need all of you. And you know what’s beautiful to me, is to see all of these ministers of the Gospel. It’s a marvelous picture. Who is it that is supposed to articulate with the longings and aspirations of the people more than the preacher? Somehow the preacher must be an Amos, and say, ‘Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.’ Somehow, the preacher must say with Jesus, ‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to deal with the problems of the poor.’ ...It’s alright to talk about ‘long white robes over yonder,’ in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It’s alright to talk about ‘streets flowing with milk and honey,’ but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can’t eat three square meals a day. It’s alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God’s preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee, [the new Kansas City]. This is what we have to do.”⁴

It is clear that if we are to read Martin Luther King, it must be done through the lens and as a revelation in his particular time and setting of Luke 4:18-19 for the sake of future generations. There are perhaps many ways to go about this. We could examine various speeches for elements of Luke 4 or even interview people who knew him in his daily routine. This essay will move in a different direction and explore his journey through twentieth century theological ethics as this was the major concern of his theological research and ethical formation. Along the way we will explore pieces of his life and work in light of Luke 4:18-19.

³ Coretta Scott King, “The Legacy of Martin Luther King: The Church in Action,” *Theology Today*, (Vol 27, No 2, 1970), 133.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope*. Ed. James Washington, “I See the Promised Land,” (San Francisco: Harper 2004), 282.

Martin Luther King and Twentieth Century Theological Ethics

II

Reading his brief extrapolation of Luke 4:18-19 in the quote above, we can too readily assume we understand King's theological framework and practice of the passage. However, for King, conclusions concerning God's nature and movement in the world involved a great deal of dialogue. It is true that his upbringing formed in him many theological assumptions that derived from Black Church theology and ecclesiology, but it was his academic venture towards ministry that pushed him to clarify and articulate his practice and thought. He says that theological exploration in seminary, "knocked [him] out of [his] dogmatic slumber."⁵ In this (main) section of the essay we will look at King's interaction with the Social Gospel and then Tillich in light of Personalism as his agreements and disagreements with these two clarify for us his commitment of Luke 4:18-19. In doing so, my hope is to identify theological commitments of Martin Luther King that allow us to hear Luke 4:18-19 in light of him.

SOCIAL GOSPEL

During his master's work at Crozer Theological Seminary, King was introduced to the works of Walter Rauschenbusch concerning the Social Gospel. This stream of thought immediately grabbed his attention, as it appeared at first glance to offer a theology for the practices he grew up learning in his father's church.⁶ In fact his father was publically known for his sermon on Luke 4:18-19 in which he declared that a Christian faith that did not seek economic reform in society is oxymoronic. And Rauschenbusch advises, "Whoever [among church leaders] wants to hold audiences of working people must

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope*. Ed. James Washington, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," (San Francisco: Harper 2004), 35.

⁶ Noel Leo Erskine, *King among the Theologians*. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), 6.

establish some connection between religion and their social feelings and experiences.”⁷

These ideas seem to correlate well. However, the Social Gospel as articulated by Rauschenbusch held some other foundational commitments that troubled King.

In pushing for a collective salvation, Rauschenbusch argued that the best way to combat the pervading sin and injustice in society was to create a government system that would combat the powers and institutions of evil.⁸ He utilizes an eschatology that says the Kingdom of God is the supreme end of everything God is and does, therefore making it not only future but presently in process. It embraces all human life and is not confined to the Church and its activities. It can be found in the family, the industrial organization of society, and even the State. And it is the role of humanity to bring this Kingdom about.⁹ He says, “A State which deals with those who have erred in the way of teaching, discipline, and restoration, has come under the law of Christ and is to that extent a saved community.” This saved community would then have to be democratic, because “God is the all-embracing source and exponent of the common life and good of mankind. When we submit to God, we submit to the supremacy of the common good. Salvation is the voluntary socializing of the soul.”¹⁰

One might think that MLK would follow this construct based on his work to change American policy. However, King writes that Rauschenbusch “had fallen victim to the nineteenth century ‘cult of inevitable progress,’ which led him to an unwarranted optimism concerning human nature. Moreover, he came perilously close to identifying the

⁷ Walter Rauschenbusch. *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1917), 3.

⁸ *Ibid*, 246.

⁹ *Ibid*, 140-45.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 98-99.

kingdom of God with a particular social and economic system...”¹¹ At Crozer Theological Seminary, there were two main camps, the “evangelical liberals” and “modernistic liberals.”¹² King identified with the former under the leadership of his professor, George W. Davis, and the latter would be categorized with the Social Gospel. Davis sought to help students, “avoid the extremes of fundamentalism on the one hand and humanism on the other.”¹³ However, what created the draw for King to “evangelical liberalism” is that it offered a framework for much of the beliefs and ideas he learned growing up in the black church. Of these, his belief in a moral order and God’s work in history converse with the Social Gospel.

Davis affirmed that the happenings of earth and the cosmos were not merely based on physics but a moral order and that it is to this moral order which “the wise man” will keep his eyes.¹⁴ This is not a statement that opposes free will, but still one that acknowledges God’s sovereignty. In his sermon “Our God is Able,” King spoke of the changes in society toward justice and clarified that they, “are not mere political and sociological shifts.”¹⁵ He continues,

They represent the inevitable decay of any system based on principles that are not in harmony with the moral laws of the universe...[God] has placed within the very structure of this universe certain absolute moral laws. We can neither defy them nor break them. If we disobey them, they will break us. The forces of evil may temporarily conquer truth, but truth will ultimately conquer its conqueror.¹⁶

The Social Gospel can dialogue here since its theology claims that God is concerned with the movements of society and longs for change. However, the

¹¹ King, “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” 37.

¹² Walter D. Watley, *Roots of Resistance: The Nonviolent Ethic of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985), 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Strength to Love,” *A Testament of Hope*. Ed. James Washington, (San Francisco: Harper 2004), 507.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

ecclesiological response is motivated by a desire to use modern sciences to create moral order. Rauschenbusch says, "...the problem of the social gospel is how the divine life of Christ can get control of human society."¹⁷ King declares that society is already God's, and that the ecclesiological response is to make this truth known in a *way* that bears witness to the truth. A need to gain control as seen in the Social Gospel does not provide the theological means for martyrdom, but preservation. It does not allow for the patience displayed when King says, "The arc of moral universe may be long, but it bends toward justice."¹⁸

Of course this discussion of moral order requires a discussion of God and history. Once again, while "evangelical liberalism" provided the academic framework for King's understandings, it was the narratives of black church that provided King a foundation here. Watley points out, "Even in slavery, as can be seen in the biblical hermeneutics expressed in the spirituals, black people articulated their belief in the triumph of good over evil, right over wrong, and justice over injustice."¹⁹ Black church theology has, "always affirmed belief in a brighter day ahead. That brighter day has been placed sometimes within the historical framework and at other times within the eschatological dimension."²⁰ King does not reject discussions of heaven but emphasizes God's work in our historical framework. He does so based on the understanding that, "As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us."²¹ In his *Stride Toward Freedom* King reveals his awe in the mystery and assurance of God's presence in history:

¹⁷ Rauschenbusch, 148.

¹⁸ Watley, 21.

¹⁹ Ibid, 22.

²⁰ Ibid, 23.

²¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1963), 84.

There is a creative power that works to pull down mountains of evil and level hilltops of injustice. God still works through history His wonders to perform. It seems as though God had decided to use Montgomery as the proving ground for the struggle and triumph of freedom and justice in America. And what better place for it than the leading symbol of the Old South? It is one of the splendid ironies of our day that Montgomery, the Cradle of the Confederacy, is being transformed into Montgomery, the cradle of freedom and justice.²²

The question remains as to what this says about Luke 4:18-19. Earlier we have agreed to follow Robin Darling Young's claim that Christian martyrs are to be read as letters—a revelation of Christ. Both Coretta Scott King and MLK himself identify his mission with this Lucan pericope. Reading King is to read Luke 4:18-19. So how does our reading of King thus far concerning his understanding of moral order and God in history help us hear Luke 4:18-19?

Luke makes use of Isaiah 61:1-2 (along with 58:6) in narrating the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, and in so doing brings the Jubilee practice of Leviticus 25 to ethical focus. Joel Green explains, "Accordingly, every fiftieth year property would be returned to the original owners, debts would be canceled, and those Jews who had managed their debts by selling themselves into slavery would be released."²³ It is clear that the Jubilee practice is one that makes known God's presence and movement in history. God does not change the structure of time to get what He wants done. Instead, He offers the possibility of a life uniquely submitted to Him along with a new imagination that trusts in God's sovereignty throughout the happenings of life through history. To entrust oneself to slavery knowing that release will come in God's time (every fiftieth year!) not only takes a dramatic patience but a radical commitment to the way and people of God. A change in mind or

²² Martin Luther King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope*. Ed. James Washington, *Stride Toward Freedom*, (San Francisco: Harper 2004), 438.

²³ Joel B. Green. *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 78.

faith is not unfathomable in the course of fifty years, especially knowing that there is no guarantee that one will live to see Jubilee. This is not much different than martyrdom, especially if we think about it in the way Martin Luther King, Jr. offers.

The hope in giving his life to the mission of Luke 4:18-19 is that he is submitting himself to the way and movement of God. The difference between the Jubilee practice and King's experience is that there is no structured and tangible telling of how long the suffering will last or if giving oneself to martyrdom will be worth it. It really takes a reinterpretation of the Jubilee practice to trustingly say with King the phrase he often preached and wrote, "The arc of moral universe may be long, but it bends toward justice (quoted earlier as well)."²⁴ And what Luke offers is a reinterpretation. Not only does his placement of Jubilee at the beginning of Jesus' ministry let it be heard, "as an announcement of the final Jubilee, the new era of salvation, the breaking-in of God's kingdom," its placement in Luke-Acts turns Jubilee into an ecclesial practice. What anoints Jesus to proclaim the Jubilee year is the Spirit that is upon him (Luke 4:18), and in Luke's overall narrative this Spirit also comes upon the disciples (Acts 1:8; 2:4) making it possible for us to live Jubilee every year subversively as King has shown us. What it takes—if we are to read King—is trust that God is alive and working history in a particular Way that always was, is and will be a part of the created order.

In the next section of this essay, we will turn to a discussion of MLK's interaction with the theology of Personalism. There is definitely a justified place to pause at his interaction with the works of Reinhold Niebuhr along the way to Personalism. However, due to the constraints of this paper, I will simply offer a few words on that matter here. For King, Niebuhr's theology is too pessimistic, especially as he encountered it after his

²⁴ Watley, 21.

dialogue with Rauschenbusch. It offers no space for the narrative hope described in the spirituals and black church theology. If he were to take on Niebuhr with great significance, his embodiment of our Lucan passage would have to keep its focus on an otherworldly interpretation and action. He would be pushed toward more compromise rather than the radical faith that led him to prophetic witness and martyrdom. It should be noted, however, that Niebuhr did instill for King an inability to let his theological hope become blind optimism as seen in the social gospel. King says, "...Reading of the works of Reinhold Niebuhr made me aware of the complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man's existence."²⁵ Niebuhr gave him language to think about the depth of both systemic and personal sin, which cannot be ignored a narrative of hope for justice. Now let us turn to Personalism.

PERSONALISM AND TILLICH

After completing his studies with George W. Davis at Crozer Theological Seminary, MLK completed a PhD in systematic theology at Boston University's School of Theology where he studied under Edgar Sheffield Brightman and L. Harold Dewolf. Both were considered major contributors to the theological discussion of personalism, but it was Davis who introduced King to the conversation. King's dissertation, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman" argued against both Tillich's and Wieman's understandings of the nature of God for the sake of promoting personalism. However, despite King's disavowal of Tillich's understanding of God's nature, King's writing and rhetoric display that he has been highly influenced by Tillich's language. Before turning to Luke 4, we will discuss personalism and some traces of Tillich in King.

²⁵ Ibid, 36.

Significant to King's theology is the understanding of God as personal. In his doctoral dissertation, he contrasts the understanding of a personal God with Tillich's description of God as "being itself" and Wieman's description of God as "creative event." Both Tillich and Weiman concluded that "to refer to God in terms of personhood was to limit God," so they used the term "supra-personal," which King translates to "unknown." King writes,

The idea of personality is so consistent with the notion of the Absolute that we must say with Bowne 'that complete and perfect personality can be found only in the Infinite and Absolute Being, as only in him can we find that complete and perfect selfhood and self-expression which is necessary to the fullness of personality.' The conception of God as personal, therefore, does not imply limitation of any kind. ... We must conclude that Tillich's 'being-itself' and Wieman's 'creative event' are lacking in positive religious value. Both concepts are too impersonal to express adequately the Christian conception of God. They provide neither the conditions for true fellowship with God nor the assurance of his goodness.²⁶

While King appears to set himself far apart from Tillich, Noel Erskine points out many connecting points between the two including the insistence from both concerning "the need for analysis of the [social] situation and the importance of God's Word providing the answer."²⁷ Erskine continues to explain their major difference: "Tillich focuses on the world situation, [while] King concentrates on a particular situation."²⁸ And when considering a particular situation in need of a hopeful narrative, an impersonal God is not sufficient. The particular situation calls for a God who can be known personally.

Despite this difference, Tillich's influence on King is still significant. Tillich's doctrine of God may not be helpful for King but that does not demand a rejection of Tillich's doctrine of humanity. Tillich writes that "the moral imperative is the command

²⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1955), 270; 275.

²⁷ Erskine, 44.

²⁸ Ibid, 44-45.

to become what one potentially is, a *person* within a community of persons.” Humans’ distinction from other “higher animals” is our ability to choose our environments.²⁹ His influence is clear as King writes that the ethical demand for integration is:

...evidential in the history of mankind. Not only are all men alike (generally speaking), but man is by nature a societal creature. Aside from the strength and weakness found in *Homo sapiens*, man has been working from the beginning at the great adventure of ‘community.’ ...The self cannot be self without other selves.³⁰

In the “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” King shows how segregation destroys this sense of personhood. He describes the scene he experienced when telling his daughter she could not go to Funtown, a white-only amusement park advertised on public TV. He said he could, “...see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people...”³¹ In the same letter, he writes, “Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.”³² He later continues by drawing on Tillich and pushing an ethic of community: “Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Isn’t segregation an existential expression of man’s tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I can urge men to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong.”³³

The question for us again is how this reading of MLK helps us hear Luke 4:18-19. We have already acknowledged the ecclesiological significance of the pericope due to the reliance on the Spirit. We have pointed out that the reinterpretation of Jubilee through Jesus can be seen in the hopeful patience and trust of MLK in his martyrdom.

²⁹ Paul Tillich. *Morality and Beyond*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1963), 19.

³⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr. *A Testament of Hope*. Ed. James Washington, “The Ethical Demands for Integration.” (San Francisco: Harper 2004), 122.

³¹ King, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” 293.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 294.

Now we can discuss the proclamation that the poor have good news, the captives are released, the blind can see, and the oppressed are free. Essentially, what Isaiah, Luke, and Jesus are speaking of here is integration. Those who have but thrown to margins of society will now have a place in community with everyone else. Prisoners and the poor who have been set in isolation similar to King's daughter will now have a chance to go to Funtown. The blind will have a whole new aspect of interpersonal relationship.

Saying this sounds appealing, but the issue for us is that people are still in prison and that people are still blind. This is where we are once again called to join MLK in saying, "The arc of moral universe may be long, but it bends toward justice."³⁴ And in saying this we practice it. Because such practices are uniquely Christian, they may require creativity, which is a characteristic of the Spirit who empowers and guides us. We may not be lawyers but we can release the prisoner from isolation by visiting her. Similarly, we can treat the poor with respect and acknowledge that we have yet to know their stories. In relation to the blind, we can first of all commit to making sure a blind person is never made a spectacle and/or treated less than human. We live in this way together and patiently, knowing that the fullness of justice is just around the bend.

Conclusive Summary

III

In this paper I have sought to clarify three things. Firstly, Martin Luther King and his story self-admittedly belong to the Church. We have given him up to the narratives of nationalism to decide the potential trajectory of his life and mission. However, what we learn on the eve of his assassination, if no where else, is that his commitment is to the

³⁴ Watley, 21.

mission of Jesus as seen in Luke 4:18-19. For us to understand his activity toward justice, we must understand him as a Christian martyr who died due to his commitment to ensure that the *Way* of Jesus is made known. Secondly, I am suggesting that we take seriously Robin Darling Young's research which clarifies that Christian martyrs are to be read like letter by their supporters as a revelation of Christ. If we do take it seriously along with the interpretation of Coretta Scott King, a major supporter, then MLK becomes for us an interpretive lens of Luke 4:18-19. In his martyrdom, his life and death serve as a citable commentary on the passage. And Thirdly, I am suggesting through this lens that Luke 4:18-19 is a passage that calls us to follow the Spirit into the patience and trust embodied by the Israelites in slavery debt awaiting Jubilee; or MLK and many struggling Americans non-violently pursuing and awaiting a change in law; or the prisoner awaiting the end of his sentence; or Jesus in the Garden and then on the Cross hoping for Resurrection. It is in this kind of Spirit-led patience and trust that we will find the end of the moral arc and see justice roll down.

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