Toward a Recovery of the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

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What do we make of Martin Luther King Jr.? Thirty years after his death, his message of reconciliation still challenges us to a higher plane. Yet we in the Restoration movement have not listened attentively to King. Easily distracted, we have missed the power of his message.

During his life, for example, King was accused of being a Communist. These accusations were co-opted by a Harding University Bible professor, who produced the book on King most widely distributed in our fellowship. While King had association with men who were once connected with the Communist party, he had no direct involvement with Communism. Instead, King spoke openly and often of his allegiance to democracy. The book is embarrassing evidence of the lure of issues that take away from the transforming content of King’s message.

In the last decade, other matters have surfaced to steal attention from King’s work. Consider the development of the most recent discussion and the subsequent threat of missing King’s legacy. In the fall of 1990, representatives of the Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project disclosed that King was guilty of plagiarism in his dissertation and other student papers. The charge that King purloined concepts, sentences, and lengthy passages in his scholastic work eventually evolved into contentions that King’s plagiarism was a career characteristic.

Popular and scholastic reactions to the accusations against King’s academic writings and speeches focused on issues of cause and result. Time magazine’s Lance Morrow compared King to an “insane angel” and a school child as he surmised that plagiarism belongs “to the same rundown neighborhood as obscene phone calls or shoplifting.” Political conservatives delighted at the revelation, grouping these charges with old claims that King was a demagogue.

What is missing from the discussion is this obvious observation: the fact that King plagiarized giants in the field of homiletics and other arts in no way overshadows King’s enormous talents. There was something original in King that ignited his orations. King’s plagiarism is a real question, but a focus on the motive or consequence of “the career plagiarist,” while in line with popular interests, directs attention away from King’s substantive work and the
To begin the recovery of King’s legacy, one must read his texts in their context and allow them to work on one’s life.

On April 3, 1968, the evening before he was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” to the striking sanitation workers and their supporters in Memphis, Tennessee. The speech was an effort to encourage the protesters to continue and to increase their efforts.

When I first read the complete “Mountaintop” manuscript, I found myself affected when King finished the Good Samaritan section and told a poignant story of his near assassination and a subsequent letter that he received. The letter was from a little girl, a white child, who, after the incident, wrote to King, “I read in the paper of your misfortune and of your suffering, and I read that if you had sneezed you would have died. I’m simply writing you to say that I’m happy you didn’t sneeze.” King took her last phrase and used it to introduce several recent moments of civil rights accomplishment. It was a lead-in to his short peroration, “I’ve been to the mountaintop, and I’ve seen the promised land.” The conclusion, often replayed during the celebration of King’s birth or in conjunction with black history month, is more than a sound bite for the civil rights movement. It is an apt conclusion to a collection of stimulating segments that must be understood by their context and assigned order. My emotions were stirred as I read King in that context.

A number of factors—the fact that I am a minister and a white male, the fact that I had a critically ill black friend at the time of this analysis, the fact that I first read this piece in a cathedral-like library—all these factors and more played into my response. One friend claims that I am moved by social guilt that comes from being born in post-slavery America and raised away from involvement in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Other than those reasons, psychological and sociological, there plays a factor of rhetorical interest—the speech itself.

For this auditor, distanced from the civil rights movement of 1968 as well as from that fateful Memphis night, the location of King’s narratives within his discourse worked in a persuasive fashion. The emotional impact of the speech occurred quite specifically when King read, “I’m happy you didn’t sneeze.” The phrase implies, of course, the correspondent’s larger concern, gratitude that King did not die. The structure of the text creates the implication, inviting emotion and calling for the audience to respond with action.

To cry in a Gothic library while reading near the Good Samaritan section in King’s last speech might attract the academic label of sentimentality. Certainly an effective ploy, the sentimental style can work to control the hearer’s consciousness. Stephen Browne argues that sentimental appeals create a confusion of spectatorship with moral action, a feeling that by only witnessing some evil, one has satisfied a moral imperative.

Sentiment, however, plays against King’s stated objectives. The specific placement of the girl’s letter within King’s text acts against blurring responsibility. One might be emotionally moved during the telling
of the story, but King’s order of disclosure forbids a sense of satisfac-
tion. King models moral action, since the Samaritan material follows
detailed imperatives to the striking sanitation workers. In that way, King
subjugates the sentimental. One does not just “have a good cry” when
hearing King, finding in the release of feelings a sense of accomplish-
ment, a penance paid for social guilt accrued while avoiding the civil
rights movement. King’s arrange-
ment makes the story march in
service of the larger text and involves
an appeal to action and physical
involvement.

King did not indiscriminately
borrow the compositions of others.
King used materials to model and co-
create the speech with his audience,
quite in the tradition of the black
church’s call and response. We have
not yet recovered King’s legacy
when we respond in agreement to
charges of his plagiarism, his alleged
Communist activities, or his philan-
dering.

To begin the recovery of King’s
legacy, one must read his texts in
their context and allow them to work
on one’s life. Be assured, King’s
message does not assuage guilt.
Instead, it points to practical Chris-
tian belief and activity. It is here, in
the praxis, that King’s legacy lives.

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Notes

1Communism is based on . . . a
withdrawal of basic freedom that no Christian
can accept.” Martin Luther King Jr., “Paul’s
Letter to American Christians,” in Strength to
2Anthony DePalma, “Plagiarism Seen by
Scholars in King’s Dissertation,” New York
Times, 10 November 1990, A1, 10.
3David Thelen, “Becoming Martin
Luther King Jr.: An Introduction,” Journal of
4Lance Morrow, “Kidnapping the
Brainchildren,” Time, 3 December 1990, 126.
5Patrick Buchanan seemed especially
thrilled with the announcement, calling King
a “man of dubious moral character, a
polarizing figure with questionable associa-
tions.” Buchanan cheered Arizona’s decision
to regard King as undeserving of a state or
federal holiday. Patrick J. Buchanan, “NFL
Caught Holding on King Day Blackmail,”
6Newsweek dismissed King’s need to
cover up academic shortcomings but
proposed “one dispiriting possibility: his
teachers held him to a lower standard of
performance because he was black.” Bill
Turque, Nadine Joseph, and Patrick Rogers,
“King’s Plagiarism,” Newsweek, 19 Novem-
ber 1990, 61. Morrow’s response is a
discussion more of plagiarism than of King:
“The mystery may be writing itself. Many
people can not manage it. They borrow.”
Morrow, 126.
7Jackson defended King with the
analogy that the situation is like that
confronted by politicians who take credit for the
work of their speechwriters. Jesse
Jackson, “King Gets a Defense from
Jackson,” Portland Oregonian, 14 November
1990, C2. Lowery, with King-like poetic
language, said, “History is caught up in his
footprints, and will be hardly disturbed by the
absence of some footnotes.” DePalma, 10.
8Two of the better articles are David J.
Garrow, “King’s Plagiarism: Imitation,
Insecurity, and Transformation,” Journal of
American History 78 (1991): 86–92 and
Keith D. Miller, “Martin Luther King, Jr., and
the Black Folk Pulpit,” Journal of American
History 78 (1991): 120–21. Context and
perspective are the key interpretive devices
that Garrow provides. Miller maintains that
good merging (referring to oneself through
biblical or hymnal language) was one of the
tools King used from his black folk tradition.
9John Higham, “Habits of the Cloth
and Standards of the Academy,” Journal of
Higham served as a member of the council
and an executive of the American Historical
10Ironically, by considering King’s
apparent plagiarism in selected discourse, one
finds remarkable editing and reformation that
highlight his rhetorical skills. See David
Fleer, “Martin Luther King Jr.’s Reformation
of Sources: A Close Rhetorical Reading of
His Compositional Strategies and Arrange-
ment” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington,
1995).
11The better text for the speech is found
in Michael Osborn, “I’ve Been to the
Mountaintop: The Critic as Participant,” in
Texts in Context, ed. Michael C. Leff and
Fred J. Kaufeld (Davis, Calif.: Hermagoras,
1989). Osborn’s text is transcribed from
audiotape and includes audience response.
12See Fleer, 19–57.
13Martin Luther King Jr., “I’ve Been to the
Mountaintop,” in Texts in Context, 319–
20.
14One can hear King’s “Mountain Top”
peroration in contemporary music. For
example, King’s voice is audible as back-
ground to the vocal leads in Paul
McCartney’s “Fool on the Hill,” Tripping the
Live Fantastic, Capital Records. Australian
artist John Fornam, “In Days to Come” and
the Irish band U2 have included, as back-
ground to one song, a live recording from
King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.
15Perhaps the listeners’ emotional
performance created an acceptable model of
reaction for me.
16Stephen H. Browne, “‘Like Gory
Spectres’: Representing Evil in Theodore
Weld’s American Slavery As It Is,” Quarterly