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Toward Recovery of the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

David Fleer

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.¹ 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.² 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.³

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."⁴ Political conservatives delighted at the revelation, grouping these charges with old claims that King was a demagogue.⁵

In all instances, motive and consequence dominated the writers' interests. While entertaining a plethora of potential reasons for King's plagiarism,⁶ the authors zeroed in on one effect: King's legacy. Jesse Jackson and Southern Christian Leadership Conference president Joseph Lowery were just as quick to provide a countering proposal, predicting that the findings

would not besmirch the prestige of King's leadership in the civil rights movement.⁷

In 1991 the *Journal of American History* formed a round table that provided preliminary discussion and, eventually, produced reflective articles on King's plagiarism.⁸ Yet the essays still focused on King's sources and his technical skill at giving proper credit. With his myopic view, John Higham helps to illumine the problem. An article by Higham described King as a "confirmed plagiarist" and maintained that Harold DeWolf, King's dissertation advisor at Boston University, "held his tongue" so as not to impede the progress of one aspiring black Christian.⁹

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

genius of his rhetorical skills.¹⁰ I propose a return to and close reading of King's texts to experience the transforming nature of his work. Consider what has happened with a careful reading of one of King's more famous speeches, his last public address.



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.¹¹ King delivered a stirring message, of which selected parts are still replayed in tributes and documentaries celebrating either King's life or the movement he represented.

One of the significant portions of the "Mountaintop" speech was a rendition of the Good Samaritan story that he had used several times

before. His presentation of the story was developed out of material that had originated in an essay by the Madison Avenue preacher George Arthur Buttrick. Yet King's formation is not to be confused as indiscriminate theft. King reworked the Buttrick material with the eye of a skilled editor. That artistic reformulation is, in fact, one reason for King's considerable persuasive talents.¹²

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 that you didn't sneeze."¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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 more¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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 satisfaction. 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 accomplishment, a penance paid for social guilt accrued while avoiding the civil rights movement. King's arrangement 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 philanthropy.

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 Christian belief and activity. It is here, in the praxis, that King's legacy lives.

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Notes

¹"Communism 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 Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 158.

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 American History* 78 (1991): 14.

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 associations." 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," *Portland Oregonian*, 14 November 1990, D7.

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 November 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 voice 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 American History* 78 (1991): 106–110. Higham served as a member of the council and an executive of the American Historical Association 1970–1974.

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 Arrangement" (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. Kauffeld (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 background 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 background 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 Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 277–92.