

Martin and Jesus

Christianity Reflected In Two Historic Writings From Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

By Eric Buehrer

February is Black History Month. Many schools will highlight the contributions and accomplishments of various African-Americans in history. This provides an excellent opportunity for students to also learn about the influence of Christianity on the Civil Rights Movement. For example, if students are to truly understand Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s activities for Civil Rights, they need to understand how Christianity influenced his thinking.

Public school officials recognize the Christian influence on Dr. King. For example, the California State Department of Education recommends that "[students] should understand Dr. King's philosophical and religious dedication to nonviolence by reading documents such as his 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,' and they should recognize the leadership of the black churches in the movement." (*History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools: 2001 Updated Edition with Content Standards*, p. 147)

Letter From A Birmingham Jail

In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Dr. King answered a group of clergymen who had criticized him for his civil rights involvement. One of their accusations was that Dr. King was an extremist. His eloquent response is filled with biblical references. In addressing the accusation of extremism, Dr. King quotes Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

"But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.'"

That portion of the Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew 5:43-44. This passage is crucial to understanding what public school officials call Dr. King's "religious dedication to nonviolence."

Dr. King, then, refers to the Crucifixion as an example of "extreme" behavior:

"In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime---the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the

nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists."

It is well within legal boundaries for students to read Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount as well as to read the description of Christ's crucifixion. How could a student truly understand Dr. King's references without reading the actual stories from the Bible?

In the Supreme Court case of *Abington School District v. Schempp*, Justice Clark, writing the majority opinion, stated:

"...it might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment."

I Have A Dream

Dr. King's famous "I have a dream" speech reflects his ideals rooted in biblical thinking. As Dr. King said:

"When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir....I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'"

He spoke of America's Founding Fathers' declaration of the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as "a sacred obligation" for "all God's children." He echoed I Peter 3:13-17 when he urged those who had suffered persecution to "continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive."

A public school teacher can read that New Testament passage to students and discuss its relevance to Dr. King's message. Likewise, students can study Isaiah 40:3-5 announcing the coming of Jesus because one of the things he dreamed of was the second coming of Jesus Christ!

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

This rarely-quoted portion of his speech reveals, again, the biblical foundation for his dream. Isaiah 40 speaks of deliverance and comfort. The chapter ends with the triumphant “He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, But

those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Dr. King’s dream rose above a legal protection of equality. His dream looked forward to the day when men’s hearts would be changed and there would be “a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.” ☪

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RESOURCES

You can find Dr. King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” on the internet at <http://almaz.com/nobel/peace/MLK-jail.html> or at www.sas.upenn.edu/African_Studies/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

You can find Dr. King’s “I Have A Dream” on the internet at www.mecca.org/~crights/dream.html or at www.toptags.com/aama/voices/speeches/speech1.htm.

Classroom Discussion Questions Regarding “Letter from...” and the Sermon on the Mount

1. Knowledge: What did Jesus tell his followers to do about their enemies?
2. Comprehension: Pretend you are writing a version of the Bible. How would you translate Matthew 5:43-44 into contemporary language?
3. Application: Perform quick skits that demonstrate what Jesus said in Matthew 5:38-44.
4. Analysis: Make side-by-side lists of the verbs that Jesus used to describe personal attacks and those he used to describe what his followers should do in response.
5. Synthesis: How would you apply Dr. King’s approach to a bully at school?
6. Evaluation: Evaluate how Dr. King applied what Jesus said.

Discussion Questions Regarding “Letter from...” and the Crucifixion

1. Comprehension: Your newspaper editor has severely restricted the space for your story. You must summarize the crucifixion in no more than five sentences or 100 words.
2. Application: Why did Dr. King call Jesus an extremist for love, truth, and goodness?
3. Analysis: You are editors of a new dictionary. Using other dictionaries, but incorporating your own thoughts, develop definitions for the three words Dr. King used in describing the extremism of Jesus: “love, truth, and goodness.”
4. Synthesis: Describe how Dr. King fused the actions of Jesus with the civil rights struggle.
5. Evaluation: Comparing the crucifixion of Jesus and the convictions of Dr. King expressed in his letter, if you could choose one motivation the two had in common, what would you choose? Explain.

Discussion Questions Regarding “I have a dream” and the Bible

1. Comprehension: Summarize the main message of Isaiah 40 in one sentence.
2. Analysis: Why do you think Dr. King included Isaiah 40:3-5 as part of his speech?
3. Analysis: How does Dr. King’s quote of the Declaration of Independence relate to his religious beliefs?
4. Evaluation: Dr. King was looking forward to more than just a legally imposed equality. How do Bible verses like Philippians 2:3 and Galatians 3:28 relate to Dr. King’s dream?