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*The Preacher King*  
by Lischer, Richard

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The Lord gave the word:  
great was the company of  
the preachers.

Psalm 68:11

*The Great Bible, 1540*

From Richard Lischer's The Preacher King.  
Oxford University Press, 1995.

## Prologue

"In the quiet recesses of my heart," Martin Luther King, Jr. often said, "I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher." *The Preacher King* may be read as an extended commentary on that confession. Already it seems unlikely that even a nation "under God" could have been so profoundly affected by the minister of a little black church in Montgomery, Alabama. It seems remarkable, in retrospect, that we were willing to listen to his overtly Christian persuasions and that so many of us were moved by them. Yet it is true. At one of its several turning points in the twentieth century, America submitted its laws and customs to the influences of one with the instincts and commitments of a Christian preacher. And he moved "the nation with the soul of a church," as G. K. Chesterton named us, as a preacher moves a congregation.

Nowadays the word *preacher* does not attract much admiration. The word is associated with parochial morality or televised quackery, but in either case the preacher is a rather narrowly defined figure. Martin Luther King was proud of the title, however, because he believed that his religious vocation was essential to the healing of the nation. To him, the preacher symbolized the combination of political and spiritual wisdom that his own church had always required of its leaders. Like the ministers of no other tradition, the African-American preacher harnessed practical necessities to religious power. The black preacher fought for the kingdom of God every day of the week and then celebrated it ecstatically, even poetically, on Sundays. The same one who flexed his muscle in the neighborhood could speak with the tongues of angels in the church. King seized upon this partnership of political acumen and religious elo-

quence—which as a black man, a southerner, and a Baptist he had inherited from his tradition—and put it to work on America's enduring problem of race.

Like a preacher, he routinely cited the Bible as the authority for his social activities, and cast the Civil Rights Movement in the light of biblical events and characters. King was a creature of contemporary politics, in his element at a press conference or a negotiating session, but he never gave in to the pragmatism of politics. There was always something more, some message from another realm—a spiritual standard that informs and judges this world and ultimately promises to save it from corruption. The language with which he clothed his arguments for a better world was invariably sermonic, which was only fitting, since for fourteen years he preached in his own congregations in Montgomery and Atlanta and in churches around the nation. The substance of these sermons he translated into civil religious addresses and fiery mass-meeting speeches, but it was always *preaching* that he was doing. Even when no text was cited and the deity was not mentioned, the audiences to these speeches considered themselves no less a congregation. King's self-proclaimed mission "to redeem the soul of America" cannot be understood apart from his self-designated identity as a preacher of the gospel.

He succeeded in injecting that gospel into the political debate much in the way the Abolitionists had more than a century before. As no preacher in the twentieth century and no politician since Lincoln, he transposed the Judeo-Christian themes of love, suffering, deliverance, and justice from the sacred shelter of the pulpit into the arena of public policy. How the preacher King accomplished all this is the subject of this book.

The portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr. that will emerge in these pages is fashioned from raw materials that most biographers and critics overlook. The substance of that portrait relies heavily on the unedited audiotapes and transcripts of King's sermons and speeches, including a few recorded by police mobile surveillance units in Birmingham and Selma. In these recorded and transcribed messages his true voice can be heard. Due to a demanding schedule of travel and personal appearances, most of his books and articles were published only with substantial editorial assistance. Even his sermons collected in *Strength to Love* contain many passages borrowed from the printed sermons of other preachers. King and his editors removed all local and personal references from these sermons and polished them up as timeless masterpieces of the pulpit. In their printed form, they are scarcely distinguishable from the liberal commonplaces of the white, mainline pulpit during the Eisenhower era. Anything resembling the African-Baptist gospel in which King was nur-

tured or the prophetic rage that often seized him was removed in order to lend his utterances universality and to recommend his Movement to as wide a reading audience as possible. In the process, his real preaching and, consequently, something of the real Martin Luther King, Jr. was lost to the public. To the extent it is possible for a book to make a sound, *The Preacher King* will try to restore its hero's voice.

Theologian James Cone and biographer Taylor Branch (along with earlier biographers David Lewis and Stephen Oates) reminded us that King was a product of the black church in America. That assertion was a welcome relief to the many studies of King's *thought*, including King's own brief intellectual biography, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," in which he portrayed his moral and intellectual odyssey strictly in terms of academic philosophy and theology. Everyone understands why that self-description was necessary and why it was important for his Movement to accommodate itself to the West's tradition of liberty. But now even the corrective to this overintellectualized profile, the embrace of King's black-church heritage, poses a new and different sort of reductionist danger by dismissing his academic formation as irrelevant. There is, however, a complexity to be captured in King, a tension that lay at the heart of his universal appeal.

This book will focus on that tension. Its interpretive lenses are the African-Baptist tradition that formed him as a preacher and the liberal theological tradition that shaped him as an American religious activist. He was both: a black preacher and a social reformer. He knew the vocabulary and spoke the language of both professions. By analyzing his sermons and speeches, I hope to illumine the brilliance with which he exploited both his inherited and his acquired language. In the process, we should learn much about King's rhetorical, theological, and political agenda for America.

What follows is a critical study. It will report not only what King said but how his total religious performance functioned as a strategy for social and political change. It will celebrate King's personal Christian commitments and, more important, explore how he used the symbols of Christianity to achieve his purposes in the nation. It will be clear that King meant to make a Movement that was Christian, a distinctive purpose that continues to separate him from other prominent civil rights leaders. Discerning the method and ramifications of that purpose is the critical task.

The first part of the book will explore King's formation in the African-Baptist church. That church was a world made up of Atlanta's "Sweet Auburn," Ebenezer Baptist Church, Morehouse College, tutors, mentors,

role models, and friends—all who played a part in bringing him through seminary and graduate school to his first plateau: his own pastorate in Montgomery. The first phase of his brief life prepared him to be the public advocate of God's justice for black people in America, which in the African-American tradition meant that he would take a church and preach. From this environment he absorbed key theological strategies for dealing with injustice that he would never relinquish. He learned more from the Negro preacher's methods of sustaining a people and readying it for action than from any of his courses in graduate school; he absorbed more from his own church's identification with the Suffering Servant than from anything he read in Gandhi. What came earliest to him remained longest and enabled him to put a distinctively Christian seal on the struggle for civil rights in the United States.

During this period he also learned to preach—not only to speak but to become an actor for his people and to assume the larger roles of prophet, evangelist, and, last of all, suffering agent of redemption. His first classroom (and stage) was his father's church. At Ebenezer, King was schooled in the authority that God's Word exercises when it is rightly voiced and dutifully heard. When he himself began preaching, he imitated skills he had long admired at Ebenezer and in other African-American congregations. He copied a great variety of techniques, acquired an impressive inventory of "set pieces"—gorgeous thematic formulas—but most important of all, at Ebenezer he learned how to follow the emotional curve of a religious idea as it takes possession of a congregation. That's what it was to preach.

He also acquired some basic ideas about the pulpit. These would later guide the strategy for his public utterances. He believed that the preached Word performs a sustaining function for all who are oppressed, and a corrective function for all who know the truth but lead disordered lives. He also believed that the Word of God possesses the power to change hearts of stone. This was not an abstract theology but an empirical experience. He had seen it happen in his father's church.

Who were King's teachers in these matters? The first section of this study will sort through the role models and mentors who taught King and made a difference in his life. We shall hear the actual voices of Benjamin Mays, William Holmes Borders, Sandy Ray, Gardner Taylor, Vernon Johns, Pius Barbour, and, of course, his father, as each makes a distinctive contribution to his apprenticeship in the Word. Some, like Mays and Barbour, mediated to him the African-American slant on the classic liberalism he was imbibing at Crozer Seminary and Boston University. In those schools he was introduced to the talismans of modern thought

whose names and theories would decorate his sermons for many years. Perhaps no famous contemporary has amassed so large a troupe of "influences" as King: Hegel, Marx, Thoreau, Freud, Rauschenbusch, Gandhi, Niebuhr, Tillich, and many others—these are the official influences, celebrated by King and many of his biographers, and no one can doubt that they played a significant role in his development. During this period he also borrowed without attribution from the published sermons of famous liberal preachers such as Phillips Brooks and others of his own generation. As much as he may have *looked* like his sources in print, however, he never *sounded* like them in church. King never parroted their sermons without adding his own distinctive voice and the unique experience of African Christians in America. Even as he received their themes, he was deconstructing them with the irony and evangelical hope of the black gospel.

This is not to say that King was only pretending to be a liberal or a Boston Personalist or that, as some have suggested, already as a graduate student he was alienated from the philosophical themes he would trade on for the rest of his life. Despite his plagiarism at Boston and the derivative character of his learning in general, the evidence shows him to have fully engaged the Western intellectual tradition. He appears to have embraced it as an alternative to the strong medicine of his own religious tradition, thoroughly absorbed its vocabulary and values, and then come "home" to his own tradition with his horizons considerably widened. For a time, at least, such themes as the infinite worth of human personality or the essential unity of freedom and the human spirit, provided the young graduate student with pegs on which to hang the aspirations of his people.

Early in his ministry he would abandon many of the critical theories about the Bible he learned in religion classes. He reverted to techniques of interpretation that were more ancient than the African-American church, such as allegory and typology, because they allowed his congregations a greater opportunity to identify their struggles with those portrayed in the Bible. The black church not only sought to locate truth in the Bible, in order to derive lessons from it, but also extended the Bible into its own worldly experience. King found the ancient methods of interpretation useful in his effort to enroll the Civil Rights Movement in the saga of divine revelation. These techniques he joined to the black church's practice of "performing" the Scripture in its music, its rhythmic pattern of call and response, and a variety of rhetorical adornments—all of which he exported from the church's Sunday worship to political mass meetings around the country. Ironically, the Boston Ph.D. made his mark on the modern world

by reviving techniques of interpretation that his professors had dismissed as antiquated.

If his allegory on "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life" sounded a bit outmoded in affluent white churches, it was his liberal theology that seemed odd in the black church. Most scholars would have published their thoughts on justice and history in learned journals. But the circumstances and choices of King's life were such that the only verbal medium he had at his disposal was the sermon. He hammered out his Christian theology on the anvil of the pulpit. Thus if we want to know what King believed about God or the human condition, the clues are in the sermons that he preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church and in other black congregations. If we want to grasp his hope for America, we have to understand what he believed the Word of God could accomplish in America. If we are still fascinated by his character or personal motivation, the sermons tell us more than the FBI's wiretaps.

A sermon is a cultic performance of a biblical text among people who identify themselves as Christians. King's sermons were that too, and therefore have an self-deprecatory quality about them because he understood that a sermon is meant to be the vehicle of something greater than itself. A public speech serves its own political agenda, but a sermon must follow the Bible's leading into every conceivable corner of life, from gossip in the barbershop to impurity in the bedroom. Because of their very genre, King's tape-recorded and transcribed sermons reveal dimensions of the man and his message not found in his published works. They have a greater degree of intimacy than his other speeches because they presuppose an audience that is also a community of faith. They presume a network of family relations and a context of pastoral care that included baptisms, prayer, admonition, and the normal range of parish activities. In some way, the mundane announcements *after* the sermon—about special offerings, church suppers, coming weddings—give the truest picture. King's sermons at Ebenezer were intimate, not merely because he occasionally let his hair down in them but because at Ebenezer he could utter religious intimacies and ecstasies he could not say elsewhere. There also he could take part in cathartic experiences unavailable in white settings.

Throughout his brief career, King preached, refined, altered, and re-preached a small canon of sermons, fewer than one hundred. Their number is not known because many of the sermons are either lost or unavailable. The exact number of sermons is unimportant because his so-called canon actually consists of an enormous inventory of set pieces, the thematic formulas he patched together in a bewildering number of combi-

nations under a variety of sermon titles. Some of the formulas were of his own devising, many were borrowed. Whatever he used, however, he marked with the stamp of his own genius. His most famous set piece was "I Have a Dream," which he developed from multiple sources, including the prayer of a young SNCC volunteer in Albany, Georgia. In King's repertoire, the piece evolved from a biblically resonant formula, which was most appropriately recited in churches and mass meetings, into one of the most famous civil-religious passages in American oratory. His ear for these pieces and his uncanny ability to punch them into a sermon or speech at precisely the right time was a legacy from the black church and its oral tradition. His originality was an originality of effect, not composition. His ability to create new thoughts and new sermons was curtailed by his public responsibilities, but it was these same pressures that summoned the best from him and made him the most significant American preacher of the modern era.

This book will trace the passage of King's sermonic material into his mass-meeting speeches and civil addresses. When he used his thematic formulas in political settings, they carried religious overtones from the Judeo-Christian tradition and his own "Ebenezer Gospel." As he repeated his formulas from one packed assembly to the next, they exerted the religious effects of faith and discipleship on his audiences. King himself became the sacrament of the Movement in whom his followers could participate by listening and responding to his appeal. Conversions to courage occurred. The Christian doctrine of self-giving love, *agape*, took to the streets of Birmingham, Selma, and even Chicago. King-led demonstrations became symbolic enactments of Bible stories that his opponents thought safely banished from politics and secular affairs. But on the contrary, to those about to march from Brown Chapel in Selma, a King sermon announced the Kingdom of God and created a corporate movement toward its realization. The Kingdom had come once again, and, in the urgency of the hour, it seemed its momentum would never be stopped.

One of the more difficult questions this study will address is the impact of King's speaking. Because his sermons and speeches eventually created many audiences, the question of their effect is a complex one. Whatever the effect he produced, it was always the result of a conscious rhetorical strategy related to the composition of his audience. King's rhetorical strategy, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, was threefold. Before black and sympathetic white audiences he elevated local conflicts into the titanic battle of universals. He elevated the Movement by clothing it in gorgeous rhetorical apparel and associating it with the most re-

spected themes and thinkers Western civilization has produced. If he was to enlist support for the Movement, he had to show that it was worth something to those who had no personal stake in it—those who were *not* earning a pitiful \$900 per year or riding at the back of the bus. With something like poetic sorcery, he conjured beautiful sounds that fairly hummed their agreement to Aristotle's advice: a free man should not talk like a slave.

Because of the derivative character of his academic thinking, it is easy to overlook the stunning creativity of King's achievement. I will insist that we do King a disservice to evaluate his originality according to his use of written sources. He practiced the creativity of a preacher and a poet. He had the preacher's (and actor's and politician's) knack of translating every stray piece of information into the dramatic communication of ideas. Although he was a shrewd social strategist, his genius was poetic in nature, for he had the prophet's eye for seeing local injustices in the light of transcendent truths. This is the gift of metaphor, and fretting about sources must not distract us from its appreciation. In King's vision of the world, ordinary southern towns became theaters of divine revelation, and the gospel became a possibility for the renewal of public life. This is what the Kingdom of God will *look like*, he promised a quarter million people at the Lincoln Memorial: like white people and black people from Georgia sitting at table together and acting like kin.

His second rhetorical strategy is related to the first but is more complex and controversial. He practiced identification with his audiences at several levels. Already as a young man, he imaginatively identified with the weariness and rage of his African-American audiences. This, combined with the nobility and eloquence of his style, filled his black audiences with courage and self-respect. King himself modeled a new confidence for the black preacher and a new militancy for the black church in the South.

More complex was his identification of black aspirations and the traditionally white consensus ideals of America. By means of a wealth of literary, biblical, and philosophical allusions, he assured his hearers that history and universal moral law are aligned with the black quest for freedom. He wanted his potentially sympathetic white audiences to recognize the best of their own religious and political values in the mirror of his message. Like a priest, he mediated a covenant with which white moderates and liberals were comfortable. In light of its frightening alternatives, *his dream was their dream too*. He reinforced this commonality in many ways—with psychological jargon, popular religious sentiment, the grammar of inclusion, and by a synthesis of biblical and civil-religious

rhetoric. For a time, he believed in this synthesis and brilliantly exploited it. At this point in his life, he was not simulating white liberalism, as some critics have asserted, but living out W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of black double-consciousness. He yearned to be fully black and fully American.

After Selma and just before Vietnam, something turned in King. He began to slough off his liberal platitudes and the rhetoric of inclusion. His civil religion was succeeded by its demythologization. By the end of his life, the one true church in which we are *all* brothers and sisters had disappeared, its place taken by the redemptive mission of the bowed but awakening black church. Unmerited suffering and other sacrificial strategies were no longer prominent in his repertoire; he continued steadfastly to practice love as nonviolence, but he also learned to get angry at his opponents and send them to hell.

Those who arrest King's rhetorical development at the identification stage will always be comfortable with him. They will lock arms with their brothers and sisters on his birthday and sway to the strains of *We Shall Overcome*. But if they read the sermons and speeches of his final three years, they will encounter a prophet who was past identifying with the oppressor's values and had gone on to confronting them. Not only his admirers but even his most adamant critics have not fathomed the depths of his militancy. In his latter years he accused America of genocide and compared its conduct of war to the Nazis'. He warned an audience in Montgomery that any country that had treated its natives as America had would not blink at putting blacks in concentration camps. He warned of long hot summers in the ghettos and began calling for radically new ways of distributing wealth. His final rhetorical strategy was the abandonment of strategy and his own surrender to prophetic rage. He reduced the number of authorities in his sermons to one: Almighty God. He began saying, "Thus says the Lord." He soured on liberalism and liberals but never gave up on preaching the Word.

He had long possessed the poet's eye for the beauty of correspondences. With the eye, finally, came the faithful ear. The orator who delighted in the symmetry of words was at the last captivated by his own stigmatic confidence in the Word of God. He believed that the same dynamic of repentance and conversion that he had witnessed at Ebenezer and in little black Baptist churches everywhere was not only *supposed* to work but ultimately *would* work outside the walls of the church. His gospel would either redeem the soul of America or consign it to judgment. In this respect, he was a true evangelist for whom every speaking engagement was a potential altar call. And, in his latter years, he was also a true

prophet for whom every conflict invited the wrath of God. Under his leadership, the Civil Rights Movement adopted the black church's joy in the performed word—and also its seriousness with regard to its only law of history: you reap what you sow. With King as its voice, the Civil Rights Movement became a Word of God movement, and the Word, exactly as it is portrayed in the New Testament, became a physical force with its own purposes and momentum.

Perhaps King's greatest spiritual gift was faithfulness to his vocation to preach the Word of God in all circumstances, including personal danger and declining popularity. He adhered to the African-American preaching tradition and, save for the last three years of his life, to the values of political and theological liberalism. He was God's trombone and a doctor of philosophy in one and the same mission. The preacher who once appealed to Billy Graham for advice was the first theological thinker since the Social Gospel movement to forge a synthesis of evangelical and liberal traditions in America, and he did it on a scale that would have been unimaginable to the Social Gospelers. The evangelist in him yearned to "save" our souls, and the liberal reformer in him did so by tapping into the deepest and best of our political and religious reserves. Through a combination of personal gifts and historical circumstances, Martin Luther King, Jr. achieved the very thing that eludes us all today: *He framed a broadly based rationale for the equality, even the kinship, of the races; and he advanced a method for attaining it.* King never produced a social blueprint for America, but, because he was a preacher, he never quit trying to shape a "congregation" of people that would be capable of redeeming the moral and political character of the nation.

# I PREPARATION