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# A Three-fold (Homiletic) Lesson from Dr. King's Pastoral and Prophetic Preaching on Violence

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**Festschrift for Prof. Dale Andrews  
Sunggu Yang, PhD**

**Title: “A Three-fold (Homiletic) Lesson from Dr. King’s Pastoral and Prophetic Preaching on Violence”**

**I. Introduction: Violent Reality, Then and Now**

In 1992 when Walter Wink stated in his *Engaging the Powers*, “Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world,” he was more than right.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, we experience violence everywhere we breathe, walk, and look, even though not every violent case is visible or directly felt. In his statement, Wink was referring specifically to two aspects of violence that make us particularly uncomfortable or sad living in the twenty-first-century North American context. He made the statement in 1992, twenty-four years after Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968. A great deal had changed over those two decades, yet violence itself had not changed all that much! Violence still remains violence. Though when Wink discusses the violent ethos of the modern world, he does not have the Civil Rights Movement foremost in mind (yet still, he mentions King several times in his writing), his critical observation that our time and place is more permeated with violence is valid and helpful. The second thing that makes us sad is that Wink observes that human violence has become a more acceptable *spirituality* of the modern world. That is, with violence being a *real* part of our souls and lives, now we not only accept violence as a *natural* part of our life, but also in many cases *approve* the use of violence. Of course, in the twentieth century, including King’s era, violence in various

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 13.

forms was sanctioned in many ways, but now we see this tendency more elevated in everyday life. Indeed, the most dreadful thing about violence is that once we start accepting and approving violence as a natural or inevitable part of our lives, there is no remedy for violence except for more violent actions against another violence. Given the circumstance, we (must) ask. In a culture with such a violence-saturated ethos, where do we find hope and what message should be proclaimed? Specifically, what hope or message do we preachers have and will proclaim? When these urgent questions come to visit our troubled hearts, gratefully we may find King's homiletic practice or his pastoral and prophetic message still applicable today for many a great benefit. I see at least three benefits or lessons from King that we can adopt in formulating the message of hope, justice, and reconciliation for our context.

## **II. A Three-Fold Theological and Homiletic Lesson from King**

Before delving into a detailed discussion of King's homiletic practice or message on violence, we need to realize that when King was fighting against the violent culture of his own era, he was not only struggling with the racial issue, which was immediately related to black people's lives; he was also trying to deconstruct all kinds of violence of the modern world. He realized that many kinds of violence had permeated North America, such as economic injustice, socio-political inequity, and immigrants' perils caused by the oppressive social and political powers. For instance, one of his biggest concerns regarding the violence of his era was the Vietnam War in which the U.S. was taking a significant part. He furiously and publicly opposed the Vietnam War because of its unjust causes and the misjudgment of the U.S. citizens about that war. Many citizens were excited about and supported the war, which made King both severely

depressed and irritated. He could not accept U.S. citizens' unjust minds and violent actions in the Vietnam War. Hence, King preached:

I am convinced that it is one of the most unjust wars that has ever been fought in the history of world. Our involvement in the war in Vietnam has torn up the Geneva Accord. It has strengthened the military industrial complex; it has strengthened the forces of reaction in our nation. It has put us against the self-determination of a vast majority of the Vietnamese people, and put us in the position of protecting a corrupt regime that is stacked against the poor.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly enough, unjust social matters, political inequity, and other types of violence of King's era continue to exist in ours. In everyday life, we often witness the economic injustice between Hispanic immigrants and their employers; we hear of plans to destroy black churches; we watch cruel killings and other violence on T.V. reality shows and dramas; we witness how unjustly children and women are treated in our society; we read in the morning newspapers about the increasing death toll of and by U.S. soldiers dispatched to other countries; and we hear the news of violent rapes and killings happening every hour in Darfur, Sudan and around the globe. De facto, we continue to live in the era of violence in which King once lived, which eventually led to his assassination. There is, therefore, no cultural difference between his time and ours regarding violence, at least in terms of its level of cruelty and pervasiveness.

This is why I invite us to revisit preacher King's reconciliatory theology and his preaching messages. His theology and messages still have much to teach us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In at least three ways his preaching theology and messages can help us to cope with our own issues of violence.

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<sup>2</sup> Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran, eds., *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Intellectual Properties Management in association with Warner Books, 1998), 219.

## Unveil and Deny the Cultural Ethos of Violence

King guides us to unveil the current cultural ethos of violence and its denial. Just as King mourned in his time, so too nowadays we tend to accept and, even worse, approve the violent cultural ethos of our society, which in turn engenders a great deal of injustice. In other words, we accept and approve violence without reflecting on it critically. How sad is that! We tend to think that violence is a natural and inescapable thing. We believe it is the way in which humans and society are created to live. “The survival of the fittest” has become a daily mantra. Hence, for instance, we tend to accept as natural that a very few people have abundance while most people struggle to get by, or that nations invade other nations to get more land, resources, and power. By our actions or our inaction, ultimately we approve that people with economic and socio-political privileges monopolize their powers. We have come to believe that this is the natural way to live! Rather than contest the inequality, we accept it, or worse, we actually endorse it. Yet that very kind of thinking regarding social, economic, and political violence King opposed. For him, there is nothing natural about humans being violent toward each other. Indeed, it is a corruption of original human nature created in *imago Dei*. According to the Holy Scriptures, specifically the book of Genesis, humans were never created to live in that violent way. Rather, we were created to live in harmony and peace with each other as well as with God. On that basis, God created the whole universe. The God of universal love and justice created the world for humanity to live in peace, love, and justice with all others, King believed. It is no secret that we are far from living in the way God intended. We fallen humans have corrupted the original Garden of peace and love and generated unnatural violence. To have any chance at recapturing the original nature of this world and our society, thought King, we just first have to condemn and deny that corruption and violence.

## Participate in Historical God's Transforming Work

Second, whether Christian or not, we are all invited to participate in God's transforming work in history through everyday life situations. Such partnership and collaboration is crucial. for God does not exist "over there," beyond the mess of the human world, nor is God an abstract projection of human's spiritual ideal. Rather, God is *here and now*, working with the oppressed and afflicted for the historical transformation of the unjust human world. Indeed, this is both 1) a strong counter-cultural statement against the broad societal atheistic notion of God today, which tends to make us regard the God of real historical liberation and reconciliation as a God of creative human invention for an imaginary mythic world, and 2) it is an adamant denial of the current church's supernatural eschatology or so-called "after-death eschatology." Already common capitalist society has lost any notion of divine judgment upon the historical world. As regards justice, capitalist society knows only its own laws, customs, and regulations. So, when its laws, customs, and regulations justify its ideals of life and social actions, there can be no higher judgment upon it, even though its ideals and actions may be unjust in the light of basic human nature or from any fine religious perspective. In such a society, there is no such thing as the God who acts against its unjust causes. Unfortunately, nowadays many Christian churches have also abandoned the notion of divine judgment upon human history. The churches seem to be satisfied with after-death eschatology or Last Day eschatology, as Jürgen Moltmann lamented decades ago.<sup>3</sup> With this type of eschatology, the churches are unable to think about and act for God's historical transformation of oppressive life circumstances. Many churches no longer talk about justice and transformation on the earth in the here and now, but project it to some far off date or far off heavenly place. In so doing, churches do not recognize their own redemptive and

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<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York, Harper & Row, 1967), 15-16.

transformative capacity, a capacity planted in them long ago and demonstrated in Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Facing these two misguided social and ecclesial notions on the divine judgment and transformation, King cannot be more unyielding in asserting God's historical judgment upon the violent reality (or the oppressors) and God's historical restoration of the afflicted. Judgement is not the final phase, however. *Ultimately, God works toward the reconciliation first between God and people and second between the afflicted and the violent oppressors or systems.* King is more than convinced that God is working with the afflicted for the transformation of the unjust causes in concrete history. So King reiterates over and again that God is present now, for and with God's people. King realized that in history there had been a number of vivid examples of God at work in such people and events as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Sojourner Truth, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. To his mind, such instances of God's redemptive, transformative, and reconciling work in people's everyday lives is the best example churches today can give of God's participation in the lives of the afflicted, the poor, and the abandoned here and now.

### The Preacher's Pastoral and Prophetic Message

Last, King realized that when the churches awaken to the violent causes of society, preachers can play a significant role in that transforming and liberating work by preaching pastoral and prophetic messages on the Word of Christ. Indeed, King came to acknowledge this reality by his own experiences in Montgomery. When the one third of the black population of the city gathered together to listen to Reverend King, and when he experienced that his voice was the most powerful cause for the black folks' non-violent liberation movement, King instantly

knew that the preacher could play a key role in the liberation of the afflicted black folks. As his life shows, King himself played that key role as a prophetic mediator for reconciliation between God and humans and between afflicted persons and oppressive systems. By being a prophetic mediator for transformation and reconciliation, King created his own pastoral and prophetic message for Christians and all of society. Doubtless, his message was both pastoral and prophetic. Pastorally, he pursued peace, love, and reconciliation of all people; prophetically, he actively invested himself in social transformation.

This is a huge challenge to preachers today. Confronting social injustice and all kinds of violence, we preachers are encouraged and challenged to preach pastorally and prophetically for all people's reconciliation and social transformation. Of course, we preachers are not expected to deliver a pastoral *and* prophetic message all the time. At times, genuinely pastoral preaching is required, as in a case of a beloved elder's peaceful funeral service in a local church, while for some occasions justice-seeking prophetic preaching is mandatory, as in a case of a Women's Rights March. Yet in the final analysis King himself showed and Dale Andrews has taught us as well that combining the Christian message of agape-oriented human care with adamant social prophecy is the best mode of any preaching for the sake of the suffering violent world.

Thankfully, preacher King is still alive among us. We can refer to him and his many sermons and speeches as we shape our own pastoral and prophetic messages for transformation and reconciliation in the present violent world. Thus, we are called *here and now*, just as King was, to work for transformation of social violence, for peace and love between conflicting parties, for healing and restoration of the afflicted, and for harmonious life among all nations. To this transformational yearning and continuing pursuit of reconciliation, King seems to have his own theological and homiletic answer to violence that he shares with us preachers today: that is, for

us to trust, preach, and act in the same compassionate God who works for and within us for liberation, peace, justice, and reconciliation of the afflicted in our particular historical contexts today.

#### **IV. Conclusion: King Legacy Continues**

In January 2009, Bishop Woodie W. White, the Bishop in Residence at Candler School of Theology in Emory University then, wrote his 33<sup>rd</sup> annual letter to King as follows:

Those days of marches and protests were aimed at simple but important goals: to eat at a lunch counter, to try on a garment before you purchased it, to attend a school in the neighborhood where you lived, to be hired for a job for which you were qualified, and yes, to exercise the most fundamental right of citizenship, to vote . . . We sought to be accepted, and to be treated as a person and a full citizen in our own nation . . . That said, it would be naïve to conclude that racism and bigotry in America are dead. *They are very much alive. Racism dies hard.* But its grip in the minds and hearts of Americans, Martin, is not as deep or as broad as you experienced. . . We need to still challenge every expression of injustice, bigotry and racism in individuals and institutions. Mr. Obama's election should encourage us to continue rather than end these efforts! . . . In so many ways, Martin, we are a better nation, a better people than you left. Not perfect, but better. And in some ways, the nation is moving beyond The Dream! Thank you and happy birthday, Martin. We are overcoming!<sup>4</sup> (emphasis inserted)

What Bishop White is telling us through his letter to King is straightforward: King's legacy of the pastoral and prophetic message has continued ever since he left America by his tragic assassination. And we are the inheritors and practitioners of King's legacy and challenged to continue King's work and King's dream. In fact, this is what would best serve as the conclusion to my essay. Vis-à-vis the ever-daunting violent reality, King looked up to God, who has been proclaimed through the universe and who has also participated in human history to overturn the

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<sup>4</sup> Bishop White, Woodie W., "A Letter to Martin Luther King, Jr.," The United Methodist Church Official Web-Site, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/in-letter-to-king-bishop-rejoices-over-election-of-nations-first-african-am> (accessed, May 9, 2017).

perils of the afflicted toward a Beloved Community of peace, justice, and harmony. Especially, King found and experienced this God represented in many historical instances and preached that God in his own present—physical and historical—moment. He was a preacher who *re-represented* this God of peace, care, and justice through his own words. It was one of King's dreams that every person who experienced the same God that King preached would be able to come together to make the world more peaceful, just, and harmonious. For then "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain will be made low; the rough places would be made plain, and the crooked places straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."<sup>5</sup> In Bishop White's letter to King, we find that ambitious dream of King being achieved through the people who listened to his words and adopted King's dream as their own. Among the many reasons why this has been possible is this: the God that King found is a real participant in human history. This God is a loving Friend of the afflicted and an all-embracing Reconciler between the oppressed and the oppressors. King knew that this God would be a sincere Companion of the oppressed, the poor, and the abandoned until the day when the Beloved Community is achieved in human history. Until then, people's struggle for the salvation of human history and liberation of the afflicted from violence will continue. Until then, the preacher's pastoral and prophetic message will not cease. Preachers will preach the message of reconciliation and justice until God's universal love fills the whole human land, until God's justice rolls down like waters on the earth, and until righteousness like an ever-flowing stream courses through all humans' hearts. King's homiletic dream still breathes among us.

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<sup>5</sup> Carson, *A Knock* 112-113.