

Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr.: Models of Preaching, Spirituality, and Social Activism

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This article is written by an African Lutheran theologian. As Christians, believers, and citizens of this world, we are called upon to pray and work simultaneously by linking *orthodoxy* (correct teachings and doctrines of the church as interpreted from the Bible and traditions), *orthokardia* (possessing the right heartedness or spirituality¹ toward God and neighbors), and *orthopraxis* (transformative social actions in worldly affairs). Such direct and intimate linking insists that spirituality and faith, inspired by God's Word, must express itself in social contexts. In short, God must not be de-emphasized, faith not neglected, and praxis not avoided.

In this spirit of transformative theologizing upon preaching, spirituality, and social activism we shall insist that a Christian's zeal for God's honor and dignity show itself in corresponding action that is directed toward the neighbors. Such an understanding of Christian ministry means that God breaks into our world and invites us to be involved in the creative and liberating dynamics of God's love and action in history.

Moreover, while human efforts cannot remove sin from the world, God's creativity involves us in these dynamics, so that we engage in seeking partial, provisional, and relative victories. Such partial victories are contained in the ministries of preaching, spirituality, and diaconal services in which the missional church participates today.

In Martin Luther's words, "after a [person] is justified by faith" such a person will not "take a holiday" but be directly involved in the affairs of this world.² God drives humans "to all the exercises of devotion, to the love of God. [...] and to the practice of love towards the neighbor."³

1. In this article "spirituality" is defined as having deep and personal experience of God, or thirst for God, and simultaneously the spirit of neighborliness, or what Africans call *Ubuntu* (sharing of the same humanity and humaneness toward each other).

2. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 26: Lectures on Galatians Chapters 1-4* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1955-1986), 26:155. Hereafter referred to as LW.

3. LW 26:155.

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According to Luther, "love your neighbor as yourself" has nothing to do with "childish love," such as "walking around with a sour face and a downcast head." Instead, one ought to remember that all human deeds and good works were redirected to the earth, with the result that we ought to be engaged in "love seeking justice."⁴

In section one on the theology of preaching, reference will be made to the *Augsburg Confession*, Article 7 on the Church, wherein "the Gospel is preached." Section two focuses on spirituality and social activism, and the simultaneous link between the doctrine of justification and its implications for socio-politico-economic justice for all.

Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr. as preachers

Let me first reveal my secret why I am going to reflect on Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr. as preachers! I believe the power of words is central and of great importance to African Christians. To put it differently, African religion, philosophy, and culture are based on oral traditions. Africans are word-people and not so much book-people. Africans used words to transmit religion, anthropol-

4. LW 27:57.

ogy, philosophy, and culture from one generation to another.

Therefore, for African Christians hearing a good sermon is like hearing a good story. Thus, the whole family would go to church to listen to a sermon and enjoying singing because there is always a lesson or a value to in still, as well as the transmission of wisdom to children. In such a context the preacher's tools are not just words, but gestures, singing, facial expressions, body movements, and acting to make biblical stories memorable and interesting. The preacher becomes the storyteller. To borrow from Karl Barth, the preacher is preaching God's Story or biblical narrative.

The question is, "What constitutes a sermon?" According to one of the first African Church Fathers, Saint Augustine, preaching has three interrelated dimensions: *docere, delectare, flectere* ("to teach, to delight, to move").⁵ In other words, a sermon ought to be fresh, in order to be educational, delightful, and enlivening. Now I am in the position to elaborate on the ministry of preaching of Martin Luther King Jr. and Martin Luther.

First, for Martin Luther King Jr. preaching was an art. It is an art to be exercised, practiced, improved, and even redone. It is said that King spent hours polishing his sermons. At the end he mastered the art of preaching and earned his richly deserved reputation as a preacher and an orator. He accomplished this while not neglecting newspaper reading, visits to the sick and infirm, and the usual clerical rounds of marrying, baptizing, and burying.⁶

Put differently, each sermon brings the moments of failure or satisfaction for a preacher, and with those moments comes questions of potential impact. At that moment you as the preacher have their full attention. Within the next few minutes, you may lose your listeners as their thoughts wander, or you may teach, delight, and move.

By the end of preaching at its best there can be stomping, clutching the air, and shouting verses as the keyboardist accompanies the preacher and the congregation erupts as ecstatic souls tremble in the church with calls of "Amen" and "Hallelujah." You, in turn, experience the joy of finding and teaching listeners, the joy of having pleased others greatly, and the joy of moving people to experience thirst for God.⁷

Second, Martin Luther understood the message of the Bible as something to be proclaimed: the joyous news of salvation and liberation that involves the *viva vox* (the living voice) of the church as a *Mundhaus* ("mouth hou"). In other words, the church is the place of preaching where the gospel is shouted by the preacher; it is not a *Tintenhaus* ("pen house" for writing). It is noteworthy to mention how Luther plays with words in the German language. During the sermon, the Word of God "cried out" (*geschrieen*), because the church is the house of the mouth (for preaching) and

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not the house of the pen characterized by "writing" (*geschrieben*).⁸

The words of the preacher make the Word of God in the Scriptures supremely alive in the present. Luther says that "one must see the word of the preacher as God's Word."⁹ He further states that "the Apostles wrote very little, but they spoke a lot... it says let their voices be heard, not let their books be read. The ministry of the New Testament is not engraved on dead tablets of stone; rather it sounds in a living voice... a living Word God accomplishes and fulfills his gospel."¹⁰ Therefore, Luther insisted on calling the church a "mouth house," not a "pen house."

At the same time preaching is not based on the notion of philosophical speculations. Luther called such speculations a "theology of glory." A true preacher tells the story of God and starts where the baby Jesus is "lying in the lap of his mother Mary" and we are "to follow the way of the baby in the cradle, at his mother's breasts, through the desert, and finally to his death on the cross."

¹¹ This theological approach is based on what Luther called "theology of the cross."

Let me focus on such theology of cross with reference to Martin Luther King Jr. Like Martin Luther, King was an exceptional preacher. To highlight some biographical details Martin Luther King Jr. was a pastor and civil rights leader whose legacy will reverberate through history long after we are gone. King's spirituality, theology, and social ethics were influenced by the Black church's "social gospel," which sought to alleviate societal problems based on Christian teachings.¹² In particular, he is known for his powerful sermons and speeches. His nonviolent approach to resisting oppression was commendable. In short, King is known for his discipleship, the act of following in the footsteps of Jesus.

The dynamism of the theology of the cross is best expressed in the sermonic power of the sermons of King. King explored passionately and profoundly the meaning of the cross of Jesus. For King, it was not primarily about a religious tradition but "the cross

5. Paul John Isaak, editor, *The Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia in the 21st Century*. (Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan, 2000), 109-111.

6. Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1976), 57.

7. Isaak, *The Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia in the 21st Century*, 110.

8. Robert M Fowler, Edith Blumhofer, and Fernando F Segovia, eds., *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 261.

9. LW 22:256.

10. A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word. Martin Luther: Doctor of Sacred Scripture*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 90.

11. LW 3:176-177.

12. La Shawn Barber, "Martin Luther King Jr.'s Legacy," in *Christian Research Journal* 33.1 (2010).

is an eternal expression of the length to which God is willing to go to restore broken communities.” Such brokenness is seen through our sin, through our evil, and through our wickedness. Thus, for King “segregation was the most blatant expression of brokenness between human beings in America.” King saw the cross as God’s way of saying ‘no’ to segregation [apartheid] and ‘yes’ to integration and reconciliation between blacks and whites and through the suffering Christ on the cross, God’s power transforming and redeeming the world.¹³

In King’s theology, “the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear.” In other words, to be a Christian, one must take up his/her cross with all of its challenges and tension-packed agonizing moments and carry it until that very cross leaves its mark upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering.¹⁴

It is through such experiences that African American spirituals were born that transmuted sorrow from the centuries upon centuries of suffering into the search to achieve freedom—in the African context the struggle from colonialism and apartheid. It is at such crisis moments of carrying the cross that African Americans start singing their spiritual hymns.¹⁵

These hymns were an Africanized form of Christianity. The spirituals provided a way to express the community’s contextualized faith, as well as forms of expressing sorrows and hopes. Simultaneously, they believed in the Jeffersonian doctrine that “all men [people] are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these being life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”¹⁶ Let us take our cue from the following spiritual on the meaning of a theology of the cross.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Oh, sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

From the background of such spirituality, King delivered his sermon, “I Have a Dream,” on 28 August 1963 from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. At the end of that sermon, it is reported that grown men and women stood at the Memorial site and wept uncontrollably¹⁷ just as when Jesus drew near and, upon seeing Jerusalem, wept over it (Luke 19:41).

King dreamed that the cross of Good Friday shall be transformed into the Easter morning of joy, when the rough places would be made plain, when the daughters and sons of former slave-owners and the daughters and sons of the former slaves would sit together around the fireplace of “brotherhood” on that day. Thus, he expressed his dream of *Ubuntu* (sisterhood/brotherhood): “I have a dream that my four little children will one day

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live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”¹⁸

In sum, the cross of Jesus teaches us who God is and what God does. Put differently, who God is and what God does is best described as God’s job description. Such a job description of God is captured brilliantly by an African American ex-slave, Sojourner Truth, who said, “Oh, God, I did not know you were so big.”¹⁹

The earth-shaking fact of God’s big heartedness belongs to the heart of Jesus’ mission and ministry to transcend religion, economic status, gender, ethnicity, race, and class. This aligns with the model of God’s mission as praxis for preaching, healing, and reconciliation “to bring the good news to the oppressed...to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (cf. Isaiah 61 and Luke 4).

Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr. as models of spirituality and social activism

In the history of Christianity, the word “spirituality” is as challenging—if not as threatening—as the term “social activism.” Both are subject to misunderstanding and misuse. When we speak of a spiritual person, we generally understand this as being someone whose “head is in the clouds.” When we speak of an activist, we sometimes intend it as a warning: here is a person at the forefront, inevitably a troublemaker.

However, in Africa such concepts are not threatening but serve as directives toward the spheres where God is praised and where one’s neighbor is served. Consider the following down-to-earth example, vividly described by Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu:

It is only a ‘living God’ interested in the everyday concerns of his [God’s] children who can also make his mind known to them through prophecy, visions, and dreams. Thus, in Ghana, car bumper stickers carry biblical, religious, and economic slogans like “Angels on guard keep off; Satan is a loser; Anointed Hands Hairdressing Saloon; and Jesus is a Winner Restaurant.” What makes such

13. James H Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 127.

14. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 127.

15. Bennett Jr., *What Manner of Man*, 4.

16. Bennett Jr., *What Manner of Man*, 133.

17. Bennett Jr., *What Manner of Man*, 162.

18. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 84-85.

19. Roger Schroeder, *What is the Mission of the Church? A Guide for Catholics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 13.

spirituality distinctive is that the African traditional heritage within which such spirituality is expressed is itself intensely and pervasively religious.²⁰

Against this background, we are witnessing an ever-increasing interest in the phenomenon of spirituality in our contemporary world. Prayer and meditation groups are burgeoning; retreat centers cater to an increasing number of lay women and men, in addition to religious workers, who are seeking a deeper spiritual life. Radio and television preachers, documentaries, seminars and conferences, and centers for the study of spirituality all have come to the fore in the last decades.²¹

For example, consider the ministry of the African American church on spirituality or what is known as soul-stirring worship. Such worship services are thoroughly embodied, deeply musical, highly choreographed sacred drama—with hands clapping, feet tapping, elders humming, choirs swaying, ushers marching, preachers sweating, and congregants shouting, all for the glorification of God, the edification of the human spirit, and the transformation of a troubled world. When the cognitive and emotive intensity of worship is manifesting itself in the worshipper, some African American Christians will joyfully declare, “I feel the fire burning.”²²

This fascinating growth of and widespread interest in spirituality with its close link to socio-politico-economic praxis reflects important global trends. The fact that spirituality is generating so much interest all over the world today provides an interesting perspective on the church and its role in the public sphere.

In the theologies of Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr., the interactions and interconnections between the church and its role in the public sphere are well known. Therefore, rereading the theologies of Luther and King awakens in us the rediscovery of spirituality as “thirst for God.” It is a lived experience of the thirst for God—a life of prayer and action. Differently expressed, to pray and struggle for justice means to fully grasp that “prayer holds the word of faith the way the earth holds the seed until it sprouts.”²³

Such theological convictions are well articulated in Article 4 of the *Augsburg Confession* on the doctrine of justification, which is the core Article where the church stand or falls according to Luther:

Also, they teach that [people] cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who, by His death, has

20. J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 235.

21. Celia Kourie, “The Turn to Spirituality,” in P. G. R. de Villiers, ed., *The Spirit that Moves: Orientation and Issues in Spirituality* (Bloemfontein: University of the Free State, 2006), 21.

22. Cf. Kourie, “The Turn to Spirituality.”

23. Clodovis Boff, *Feet-on-the-Ground Theology: A Brazilian Journey*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 97.

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made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. (Rom 3 and 4).²⁴

Today it is important to underscore the central status of Article 4 on justification and its implications for justice. If not, Karen Bloomquist and Martin Sinaga assert that Lutheran theology may be “at risk of losing its essential role in the life of Lutheran churches.”²⁵ In order to avoid risking the loss of the essence of Luther’s theology, one ought to address the specific relationship between faith (*orthodoxy*) and good works (*orthopraxis*). It has been said that Lutherans have a powerful theology but weak praxis.²⁶ Bonhoeffer indicated such weakness in terms of cheap grace and costly grace in *The Cost of Discipleship*.²⁷

Today the perceived weakness of Lutheran theologies between orthodoxy and orthopraxis is a non-issue, because we are becoming aware of the need to “transcend” and liberate Lutheranism from its historical European and North American “Babylonian captivity.”²⁸ Today, theologians from the global South are rediscovering that Luther’s question, “Where do we find a merciful God?” is always directly linked to the cry, “How can we be merciful neighbors to one another?” Having been made righteous by Christ, as Luther observes, we become “a Christ” toward the neighbor by enabling the poor to have their daily bread.²⁹

A Lutheran understanding of service always has the neighbor as its focus. For Luther, importantly, the entire world is the neigh-

24. Theodore G Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 30.

25. Karen Bloomquist and Martin Sinaga, “Theological Education in Lutheran Churches,” in *A Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Ecumenical Trends, Regional Surveys*, ed. Dietrich Werner, et al. (Oxford: Regnum, 2010), 654.

26. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1979), 222.

27. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1963), 47.

28. R.H. Bliese and C. Van Gelder, eds., “Addressing Captives in Babylon,” in *The Evangelising Church. A Lutheran Contribution* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 44.

29. LW 31:367.

bor. The Christian is charged with bearing the face of Christ to the neighbor, while scrutinizing the neighbor for the presence of Christ.³⁰ To put it more precisely, studying and doing theology can neither be a neutral exercise of academic detachment nor can it be a substitution for faith and commitment. Instead, theology itself becomes a transformative theologizing process to worship the Triune God and render diaconal ministries to the neighbor.

This kind of religious tradition firmly rooted in the Triune God and this kind of action constitute the core of the gospel that results in a radical alteration in the human condition. In other words, justified sinners are engaging themselves in altering prevailing social relationships, in order to profess their faith convincingly. Karl Barth has brilliantly expressed such unity of faith and good works as follows: “The doctrine of God is ethics.”³¹

Such grounding of ethics in the doctrine of the Triune God means that the activity of God does not abrogate human activities but only relativizes them. God is not the enemy of our action to build reconciled and healing communities, gender equality, freedom, peace, nation building, and social justice for all. In fact, “God is not exalted in the suppression of the creature. God does not find his triumph in the creature’s lack of freedom or power as compared with his own unconditional and irresistible lordship. He does not work alone when He works all in all.”³²

Conclusion

Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr. may be regarded as servants of preaching, spirituality, and social activism. Luther and King have enabled the church to tell the gospel truth in bold humility. Today, for the church to participate in the mission of God means to be engaged in missionary activities by following the prophetic practice as proclaimed in Micah 6:8, “[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

These words are echoed in the Letter of James 2:14-17: “What good it is, my brothers and sisters, if you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

This is the biblical and prophetic mission which the church must follow in faith and works. God acts in history by choosing to work through the church and human beings by means of the ministries of preaching, spirituality, and diaconal engagement. It is a question about the central issue, namely, the Christian response to socio-political and economic events. This is the thrust of Luther’s ethics as rendered in the title of Ulrich Duchrow’s

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Christenheit und Weltverantwortung, namely the responsibility of Christians to the world.³³

In rediscovering our discipleship, the true nature of spirituality and commitment emerge. While we are always joyful at the beginning of our faith journey, sooner or later somebody will die of COVID-19 or cancer, or we will experience great disappointment in the social and economic structures that crush the poor and make the rich richer. Such crisis moments are *kairos* moments when our spirituality and social activism are tested. Out of such testing our sermons are born.

30. M.E. Stortz: “Beyond Service: What Justice Requires,” in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37 (June 2010): 237.

31. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume 2, part 2*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936-1969), 515.

32. Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume 3, part 3*, 130.

33. Ulrich Duchrow, *Christenheit und Weltverantwortung: Traditionsgeschichte und systematische Struktur der Zweireichelehre*. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1970).