

MLK on Malcolm X: A Prophetic Warning for Christians Today

In 1965, the civil rights era was nearing its boiling point.

All the while, two streams of the movement strove side-by-side, oftentimes indistinguishable from one another—but leading to two vastly different destinations.

In a January 1965 interview with *Playboy*, King expressed his pointed disagreements with fellow African American civil rights champion Malcolm X:

He is very articulate ... but I totally disagree with many of his political and philosophical views ... I don't want to seem to sound self-righteous ... or that I think I have the only truth, the only way. Maybe he does have some of the answer ... I have often wished that he would talk less of violence, because violence is not going to solve our problem. And in his litany of articulating the despair of the Negro without offering any positive, creative alternative, I feel that Malcolm has done himself and our people a great disservice... [U]rging Negroes to arm themselves and prepare to engage in violence, as he has done, can reap nothing but grief.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Malcolm X. Similar ideas. Similar goals. Divergent methods.

Years of historical distance have hopefully brought clarity. Both men are credited for their contributions to human rights, but only one is recognized for his defining virtue: nonviolence.

What if we took King's quote about Malcolm X and adjusted the wording for ourselves?

"In *their* litany of articulating the despair of the

evangelical Christian without offering any positive, creative alternative, I feel that *some conservatives* have done *themselves* and our people a great disservice... Urging *conservative Christians* to arm themselves and prepare to engage in violence, as *they* have done, can reap nothing but grief."

Christian brothers and sisters. Proponents of "Judeo-Christian" American values. Conservatives. Constitutionlists. Tea Partiers. Our time has not quite yet come, but it will fall upon us quickly.

We are at the same crossroads.

How did we get here?

I ardently believe the biblical truth that sex is a precious gift bounded within the confines of a husband and wife. The LGBT movement is in rebellion against the design of our Creator, and represents just one of many areas of our society characterized by spiritual decay. Christians and churches need to stand up, speak the truth in love and never shy away from controversial issues—even if that means people will tune us out.

At the same time, has "truth in love" become nothing more than a meaningless slogan for many of us?

Our Approach

Let us not forget the influence of Islam upon Malcolm X. Islam, whether of the Nation of Islam or Sunni/Shia variety, is a religion of submission and effort, meaning that I could sufficiently "make you" a Muslim through force—because the marks of being Muslim are external obediences (saying the *shahadah*, performing *salat*, observing Ramadan, going on *hajj*, paying *zakat*). But Christianity is a matter of being forgiven, justified, sanctified and made new at a heart-level working outward in life—something that can never happen

through human force.

In my family, we share our opinions often. Loudly. Especially when the news is on. And so, with each report of growing spiritual and moral decline, we become more passionate. Or bitter. Not always—we try not to outright insult people, even on the television—but we are not perfect, either.

My wife made an astute observation not so long ago that has become a governing principle in our household: *we cannot expect unregenerate sinners to act like Christians.*

Are not so many of our frustrations born of our expectation that spiritually dead sinners act like born-again children of God?

There was a time in America when the societal norm was something along these lines. But that time has now passed, and Christians have a choice to make: either we will seethe in frustration, or return to the root of the problem.

What we see as a deteriorating society, God sees as the separating of wheat from tares, or sheep from goats.

The fruits of unrighteousness are manifesting in America, making it clearer who is lost and who is not. The “mushy middle” is disappearing.

Thus, Christians who are mainly seeking to restore a “Christian culture” are *trying to pluck good, juicy fruit from bad, dead trees.* It’s futile.

Expecting a lost world to be hospitable to Christian values goes beyond beating a dead horse; it’s trying to ride one.

If you check the branches and don’t see any good fruit, the problem is in the root of the tree itself.

Yes, we are to wield the weapon of discernment—the truth of God’s standards. But we must ask, for what purpose do we wield

this weapon: to lead sinners to their Savior, or simply correct societal ills?

Hebrews 4:12-13 boldly states:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Make no mistake; our gospel presentation *should* present God's holy Law. But we must never forget that the purpose of the Law is so that the Spirit can convict hearts, leading them to repentance and faith in Christ. The Word of God is meant to cut to the heart, not just the exterior.

The Law is the tutor that brings sinners to the gospel (Galatians 3:24). The Law is good, and we must never be ashamed of it; but its purpose is to expose sin in the unbeliever's heart (1 Timothy 1:8-11), *not* treat the root cause of sin.

Our Response

When you turn on the news (or open Facebook) and see what is happening to our culture in the areas of sexuality, the unborn, entertainment and religion, how do you respond?

If you are frustrated at what you see, you might have one of these stock reactions:

- Avoidance (turn it off, pretending it's not a problem)
- Preaching to the choir only (to Christians or conservatives)
- Venting (to non-Christians)

And if your reaction is of the more vocal type (preaching to

the choir or venting to the rest), then you've probably been tempted by negative emotions at one point or another. You may have also justified negative emotions with some of these common statements—true statements, but statements in need of context:

- “Loving people means telling them the truth” (true, but loving people is more than *just* telling them the truth).
- “Jesus called the Pharisees a ‘brood of vipers’ and ‘children of the devil.’ “
- “Jesus turned over tables in the temple.”
- “Jesus cursed the fig tree.”

Yes, we are quick to justify our actions with Christ's. But remember, who was Jesus lashing out against—was it prostitutes who were corrupting the moral atmosphere Israel (the original “Christian nation,” if you'll pardon the anachronism)? Was it the tax collectors who were betraying honest financial practices? Was it the Romans who were encroaching upon the God-given freedoms of the Jewish people?

No, because Jesus didn't expect lost people to act saved.

He cursed the religious leaders *because they were the ones he had expected to bear good fruit*. He drove out the temple merchants *because he had expected better in God's house*. He cursed the fig tree *because it bore no fruit during fig season*.

Christ's righteous anger was aroused when God's people—seemingly “good trees”—failed to bear fruit.

Were the prostitutes, tax collectors and other heathens sinners? Absolutely. Did Christ approve of their sins? Hardly. But he also did not expect unregenerate people to suddenly live up to holy standards on their own. Instead, he offered them the only thing that could change them: repenting and turning to him. “Come unto me.”

Because only in being identified with *his death and resurrection* can any sinner be reborn with a new nature—a heart of flesh capable of bearing good fruit, not a heart of stone.

We need to lift up what the Bible has to say about marriage, family, unborn life, sexuality and a variety of other issues. There are all “gospel issues.” But far be it from us to neglect *the preaching of God’s grace in the gospel* as we correct these issues!

Our Means

What does all this have to do with Malcolm X?

Friends, amid our lamentation for our country, we have forgotten that “such were some of you” (see 1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Many of us are becoming embittered by the lost, not burdened.

We have sacrificed the gospel that gives *grace and truth* to sinners on the altar of a conservative agenda that gives *truth only*. And with that action, we have wrought for ourselves an idol, a false Christ—one whose standards for the lost are higher than his standards for his own people—and a false Christianity in which my only cross to bear is to point out the flaws of others.

Such is the reason that now, many dyed-in-the-wool conservative, churchgoing folks are all too willing to take up arms, start a second American revolution and reclaim the nation by force.

Interestingly, the Jews of Christ’s day were all for reclaiming their country from tyranny—but when they rejected the ways of the suffering servant sent to them (see Isaiah 53) and the new birth he offered them, God did not reward their nationalistic zeal; he punished it in A.D. 70 with the

annihilation of Jerusalem at the hands of her oppressors.

Does God judge unregenerate, godless sinners? Absolutely; look at Sodom and Gomorrah. But even harsher is God's wrath against those who honor him with their lips but have hearts far from him.

An Exhortation

Our "creative, positive alternative" (borrowing King's wording) is the loving, nonviolent, compassionate, sacrifice of a life laid down to preach the gospel—not a life lost in defense of one's own stockpile of weapons and canned food.

Yes, we will be hated, despised and stripped of our freedoms—even lives—the further our culture deteriorates. This is no strange thing (John 15:18). We are no greater than our Master, after all.

Like the church at Ephesus (see Revelation 2:1-7)—though we may "have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false" and "hate the works of the Nicolaitans" and may not "bear with those who are evil" or "grow weary"—all the while, may our Lord *never* say of us, "you have abandoned the love you had at first."

Perhaps taking up arms is the last thing on your mind. Good. Perhaps you have not ever considered any kind of forceful resistance to the government, civil or otherwise. Excellent. But has bitterness filled your heart? Is it easier for you to rail against abortion than it is for you to extol the love of Christ? Can you preach a longer sermon against homosexuality than you can *for* the gospel? Have you stopped sacrificing yourself to be Christ to others?

Believe what the Bible has to say about social problems and sin. But when you are tempted to anger, pray for those far from Christ. Share the gospel with them, using the Law to usher in the Spirit's conviction. Do not compromise love in

the name of truth, nor truth in the name of love. Let righteous indignation have its place alongside grace and mercy.

This word of warning is not about how we come across to unsaved people, but to God. Because when we lay down the Holy Spirit's weapons of love and suffering and replace them with resentment, it is not the world's judgment that should concern us; it is Christ's.

May no Christian conservative go down in history as the Malcolm X of this movement.

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