

Powers and Principalities: The Truth About Martin Luther King's Fiery Pentecostal Roots—Part 2

This is part two in a two-part series. [Click here](#) to read part one.

The Movement After King

The failure of King and his church-based movement to fully recognize the spiritual character of the unraveling of a coherent political left during the '60s had significant cultural consequences. During the next decade, various forms of an ingenious and complex art form, hip-hop and rap, emerged. This spoke as much to the pain of devastated inner cities as to the creativity of those who had been abandoned there.

Christian philosopher Cornel West provides a brilliant and important analysis of this environment. In his book *Race Matters*, he asserts, correctly, that “the proper starting point for the crucial debate about the prospects for black America is an examination of the nihilism that increasingly pervades black communities.” He then proposes a definition: “Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is far more the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness and most important, lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world.” His analysis finds its most creative empirical confirmation in the words of Grandmaster Flash's classic, “The Message”:

You'll grow in the ghetto livin' second-rate/ And your eyes
will sing a song called deep hate
The places you play and where you stay/ Looks like one great
big alleyway
You'll admire all the number-book takers/ Thugs, pimps and
pushers and the big money-makers . . .
And you'll wanna grow up to be just like them, huh . .
./ Turned stick-up kid, but look what you done did
Got sent up for a eight-year bid . . ./ 'Til one day, you was
found hung dead in the cell
It was plain to see that your life was lost/ You was cold and
your body swung back and forth
But now your eyes sing the sad, sad song/ Of how you lived so
fast and died so young.

Such an attitude of nihilism reflects the triumph of the
demonic in the surrounding culture. What, then, is to be done
about it? West, drawing on the teachings of Jesus, proposes an
answer: "If one begins with the threat of concrete nihilism,
then one must talk about some kind of politics of conversion....
Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses. It must be
tamed by love and care."

West understands that a "love ethic must be at the center of
the politics of conversion." One needs the supernatural power
of God to resist the power of the evil one and to accomplish
the transformation required to live a life of love. At this
moment in history, the church must once again engage in the
spiritual warfare that will transform society and renew
culture.

To Demolish Strongholds

The spiritual reality of the civil rights struggle was grasped
early on by the theologian William Stringfellow. At the first
National Conference on Religion and Race in 1963—where King,
Sargent Shriver, and Abraham Joshua Heschel also
spoke—Stringfellow argued that white supremacy had to be

understood as a demonic principality. This conference was the first time mainline denominations seriously engaged the freedom struggle, and Stringfellow's remarks were controversial, especially his excoriation of the meeting as "too little, too late and too lily white." But just as provocative was the following claim:

The monstrous American heresy is in thinking that the whole drama of history takes place between God and humanity. But the truth, biblically and theologically and empirically, is quite otherwise: The drama of this history takes place amongst God and humanity and the principalities and powers, the great institutions and ideologies active in the world. It is the corruption and shallowness of humanism which beguiles Jew or Christian into believing that human beings are masters of institution or ideology. Or to put it differently, racism is not an evil in human hearts or minds; racism is a principality, a demonic power, a representative image, an embodiment of death over which human beings have little or no control, but which works its awful influence in their lives.

In asserting this, Stringfellow advanced a much more radical understanding of the nature of racial injustice in the United States and implicitly proposed a more Pentecostal reading of these historical events.

What Stringfellow missed, however, is something that the former slave Bishop Mason would have pointed out: that human powerlessness in the face of demonic racism is transformed into potency by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not the power of the Holy Spirit as an abstract concept. Rather, it is the power of the Holy Spirit that Luke describes in the Book of Acts with the occurrence of miraculous signs and wonders, and that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5: "My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of

God.

“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4).

Although I am sure that in many of the churches in Montgomery and Birmingham and throughout the South, particularly in the small churches of the poor, there were saints engaged in Spirit-filled intercessory prayer, more of that power would be needed as King moved to larger cities where he encountered more powerful territorial spirits. In opposing white supremacy in small cities, the prayers of scattered believers invoking the Holy Spirit proved adequate. But in a larger metropolis, much greater power would have been needed. To say this is not to dismiss the impact of institutional and structural factors on the movement in large cities. From a spiritual perspective, these structural forces are an integral part of the operation of the demonic principalities.

To the extent that a biblical conception of supernatural forces informed King’s analysis of the challenges he faced and his strategic decisions regarding the direction of the movement, this aided his success. And whenever the movement failed to reckon with the entrenched principalities it was up against, this contributed to its failures.

What’s at Stake Now

Christians today must likewise adopt a more discerning posture and a supernaturally informed wisdom, recognizing the hold that the principality of white supremacy still has in the United States. We need a political theology of the Spirit building on the best traditions of King, incorporating both a radically biblical understanding of intercessory prayer and solidarity with the poor.

Half a century after King’s death, how does all this apply to today’s social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter(BLM) or Antifa, which are led by secular activists?

BLM, the leading movement against police violence, has mobilized tens of thousands of young people across the country and internationally and brought much needed attention to the issue. Their work highlights the moral and political failure of the black church to speak prophetically against the use of excessive force against black people, especially in the inner city.

Yet in some ways BLM is an example of George Santayana's axiom that those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it. For the most part, BLM activists—like the post-1965 SNCC activists, the Black Panther Party, and assorted other radical black groups before them—exhibit little interest in, or comprehension of, the larger lessons of history. This is because they lack the deep spiritual and moral insight that must be the grounding for any sustainable movement. Having rejected the God of their fathers, they have also rejected the fatherhood of God.

This philosophical rejection is an act of spiritual and cultural suicide. Failure to discern the demonic character of white supremacy limits these activists' ability to understand the fight they are engaged in, and hinders their efforts to develop long-term strategies. They can only describe the sadistic violence they witness and never fully understand or conquer it, so long as they ignore its spiritual source.

More importantly, they fail to use the only means of combatting the demonic: intercessory prayer. Instead, they are easily sucked into the spirit of the demonic themselves as they resort to violence, anger and hate—a failing less common in the BLM movement than in Antifa, though the danger applies to both.

Anger and outrage cannot sustain a movement over the long term; only prayer and the power of God can. King was right to emphasize the importance of enemy-love and nonviolence. He was much more than a civil rights leader; his political philosophy

was grounded in the biblical prophets and the ethics of Jesus. In the final analysis, it was the Holy Spirit, which he allowed to work in and through him, that made Martin Luther King Jr. the most influential voice of conscience and religious freedom in the United States in the 20th century. His life and witness can continue to inspire and challenge all of us who call on the Spirit to move in our communities and across our nation. {eoa}

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