

Powers and Principalities: The Truth About Martin Luther King Jr.'s Fiery Pentecostal Roots—Part 1

This is part one in a two-part series.

“I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; then your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions” (Joel 2:28).

The night before his death, Martin Luther King Jr. preached his last sermon in Mason Temple. A monumental brick-and-stone edifice in downtown Memphis, Mason Temple is the mother church of the second-largest black denomination in the United States, known as the Church of God in Christ. Near where King was standing was the marble tomb of the church's founder, Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, who had been born a slave and had gone on to become black America's foremost Pentecostal leader.

Pentecostalism, now the fastest-growing branch of Christianity, emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit to transform every aspect of the believer's life. The movement originates in the multiracial Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906. Just months after the revival began, Mason traveled to California to see what was happening with his own eyes; it proved to be the turning point of his life. As Mason would later recount, “The Spirit came upon the saints and upon me.... Then I gave up for the Lord to have his way within me. So there came a wave of glory into me and all of my being was filled with the glory of the Lord.”

Mason, having now been “baptized with the Holy Spirit,” as Pentecostals describe such a conversion experience, became a fearless evangelist for the new movement. By the time of his

death seven years before King's sermon, the Church of God in Christ counted 400,000 members in 4,000 churches in the United States and around the world.

Your Sons and Daughters Will Prophecy

This sanctuary, then, was the place in which King rose to deliver his farewell "Mountain Top" address: at an epicenter of global Pentecostalism. In retrospect, this seems powerfully symbolic. For Pentecostals, a central Scripture is the promise of the prophet Joel, which the apostle Peter quoted at the first Christian Pentecost in Jerusalem: "I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; then your sons and your daughters will prophecy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions" (Joel 2:28). Heard in this context, King's last sermon can be understood as a fulfillment of this ancient promise. He, too, was one on whom the Holy Spirit had been poured out, one empowered with the gift of prophecy.

As we mark a half-century since King's death, few tributes acknowledge that the spiritual and political movement he led was a movement of the Holy Spirit. Yet secular accounts of his life and message are inadequate to explain what happened to and through him. Nor do they recognize that the forces he opposed—white supremacy, economic oppression, and militarism—are spiritual realities in their own right, demonic powers that must be combatted with spiritual weapons. As the New Testament puts it, "For our fight is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

This is not just a matter of historical interest. Whether or not the Holy Spirit inspires our political and cultural activism is of urgent importance today. The virulence of white supremacist discourse is at a new low, while white supremacist action is at a new high, with innocent people being attacked in Charlottesville, Virginia, and at Mother Emanuel Church in

Charleston, South Carolina. This reality demands that the church reclaim the power of the Spirit to discern the most effective response. We must name, unmask and engage the invisible powers that threaten human existence.

King the Christian

Throughout the 1960s, King waged a political struggle against the macrostructural forces arrayed against black people. His genius was to recognize the power of the black church for organizing resistance to white supremacy, a dynamic that none of the secular intelligentsia had foreseen. None of the social scientists, black or white—W. E. B. Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, Gunnar Myrdal, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. —had predicted this. King insisted that the word “Christian” be part of the title of what was originally the Southern Leadership Conference, because he knew that blacks in the South would be strengthened by Christian solidarity, and that for them the church would be the most powerful organizing base. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference went on to become one of the leading institutions in the civil rights movement.

Just as insightful was King’s commitment to the Christian ethic of love, based in the teachings of Jesus. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught nonviolence, love of enemy and unconditional forgiveness. For King, Jesus’ way of love had a deep kinship with the strategy of nonviolent resistance he learned from Mahatma Gandhi.

There is no doubt that King sincerely believed in the principles of nonviolent action. But the strategic brilliance of using Gandhi’s methods is also unquestionable. In the American South, with its terrorist, totalitarian Jim Crow regime, nonviolence was the perfect weapon.

The gains that the civil rights movement achieved as a result were unprecedented—and God-given. Yet by the end of the 1960s, King’s reliance on Gandhian ethics alone was proving

insufficient. A Protestant liberal by training, he was only dimly aware of the invisible principalities and powers that lay behind the violence of white supremacy. In the end, this restricted theological vision limited the longevity of the movement and its ability to adapt to radically different political circumstances, such as urban life outside the South.

The Influence of Liberal Theology

Martin Luther King Jr.'s liberalism, in fact, might be seen as an accidental byproduct of the supremacist totalitarianism of the American South. Raised in his father's church in Atlanta, Ebenezer Baptist Church, he was taught to believe in the authority of the Bible. But his understanding of the New Testament's teaching about the Holy Spirit, with all its potential political implications, remained underdeveloped. He was educated at Morehouse College, the favored institution for the training of elite black men, where he was mentored by the legendary but theologically liberal Benjamin E. Mays.

He then went on to Crozer Theological Seminary in Upland, Pennsylvania, where he absorbed the theological liberalism of 1950s Northern Protestantism. Here he was taught a low view of biblical authority—and a suspicion of the miraculous and supernatural. The historian Taylor Branch, in the first volume of his Pulitzer Prize-winning trilogy, *Parting the Waters*, captures the theological world of the young King as a Crozer seminarian. The standing joke among Crozer students who survived the first term was that “the biblical image of Moses was destroyed in the first term and Jesus was finished off in the second.” This milieu distanced King from a purely biblical vision of the Holy Spirit.

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There is, however, more to this story of King's theological evolution. In the 1950s South, theologically conservative seminaries, regardless of denomination, were largely segregated. Unlike Northern seminaries, they claimed to hold a high view of the Bible—and used it to justify Jim Crow by interpreting Noah's curse on his son Ham's descendants as referring to blacks. Thus, they espoused young earth creationism while also, with rare exceptions, tolerating if not endorsing the terrorist program of the Ku Klux Klan.

Herein lies an amazing irony, that the racism of white Southern seminaries drove the most talented future black leaders to integrated Northern seminaries, which were at least less explicitly racist. In this way, conservative Christians' sin of white supremacy planted the seeds of resistance in the hearts of a rising generation of black church leaders. Not surprisingly, however, these precocious black students emerged with a decidedly liberal theological and social orientation. Thus, for the first half of the 20th century, the intellectual leadership of the black church would be educated in an environment that inhibited them from fully tapping into the Pentecostal movement's radically biblical vision of the power of the Holy Spirit.

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