

Two Men, One Passion  
**Martin & Martin**

Luther & King  
January 20, 2008

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**BIBLE VERSES**

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**OT Lesson: Amos 5:14-15a,24 (NRSV)**

<sup>14</sup> Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. <sup>15a</sup> Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gates...<sup>24</sup> let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

**NT Lesson: Galatians 3:23-28 (NRSV)**

<sup>23</sup> Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup> But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, <sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

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**OVERVIEW**

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Two men with similar names and passions: equal standing for all people, because in Christ we are equally God's children through faith.

On October 31, 1517, a young German monk and university professor named Martin Luther sought to debate his superiors and peers on the church's view (and, therefore, society's) regarding what God's Law required of humans, what the Law consisted of, and what happened if they chose to ignore it and God. He used an accepted method to communicate such a request by hammering questions to the massive wooden doors of the Wittenberg Church. As his superiors refused the debate and attempted to silence him with their preferred methods – excommunication and death – Luther's friends who owned a printing press effectively mass-mailed Luther's works throughout the land. Akin to when our own emails and blogs on controversial subjects acquire a life of their own, Luther's words lit an unexpected firestorm, ultimately changing Western Civilization and creating the world we know today. That was *some* hammering.

Although Luther was a monk, and therefore a church professional, the more he studied and taught Scripture as a university professor the more he learned the church's insistence that its ordained professionals were more important people to God, and therefore superior to all others, was not backed

up by Scripture. For Luther, the New Testament writings from Paul to various congregations throughout Asia Minor were very important, including Galatians 3:28 (above). Paul was writing to a Greek society that placed free men above all others, and whose daily focus was on obtaining perfection in various forms: in body, soul, and life. Paul countered that baptism into Christ equalized everyone; there was no hierarchy of people in God's mind. All people were equally sinners, and all people fell short of God's glory: there was no superiority anyone could boast about when kneeling before God. All people needed Christ for God to reconcile with them; no one could work their way back into God's good graces. But, Paul wrote, because our baptism connects us all to Jesus' death and resurrection, we became part of God's royal priesthood. The difference between each of us, then, are the different jobs God gives us to work for each other.

Luther stood up against the abuses he saw from the church to society, and ultimately changed the way the world operated. While the church officials kicked him out of the Roman Church, and tried multiple times to kill him, Luther's writings quickly spread throughout Europe – from Italy to Spain to German to England. Once the people began to think for themselves, and read Scripture in their own language (Luther was the first to translate the New Testament into regular German so all could read for themselves), many people from peasant to prince began to question how the church was running society.

Through Scripture, aided by Luther's teaching tools (the Small and Large Catechisms) people learned God taught to place God first, honor God's name and give God space in their lives life for rest and re-creation. Then, God laid out how to treat each other with respect and love, and to make sure other's possessions are kept whole and their needs were met with justice and mercy. God never defined whom was not to be treated well, nor whom deserved injustice; since we are equal in sin we equally need God's forgiveness, and forgiveness from each other, for being humans working together.

God's design did not mirror Luther's society. Then, the wealthy scammed the poor, the poor scammed the wealthy, the merchants scammed their customers, and the church ran the biggest scam in town by raising money through the sale of indulgences: fake "get out of jail free" papers that were supposed to reduce God's wrath for your sins, for a fee of course. Instead, Luther countered that what God wanted were people who placed God first in life and trusted that God would provide all they needed. Then, since through trust they had no more worries, they should honor God by trying to live for each other – always knowing that God knows they were human, and through their trust promises to forgive them forever.

Martin Luther King found a similar situation in America in the mid-1900's. People whose ancestors came from Africa, who were blessed with darker skin to withstand living nearer to the equator and to the sun, were treated as not-quite humans by people with lighter skin whose families had come from European countries. It didn't matter whether the lighter-skinned people had any ranking within their own communities; their lighter skin color blinded them into believing their history, and their sense of achievement, made them better people in God's eyes.

King said "what bunk," to put it mildly. A Baptist preacher with his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Boston University, King knew his Bible, and just like Martin Luther knew the inequality of people was the opposite of what God taught. King reminded people, especially Anglo Christians, that in Scripture all people were equal under God's laws. God called all people to bring justice and mercy to bear, and all of our citizens deserved equal protection under our country's laws.

At age 24, King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. He saw first-hand the horrible disparity between blacks and whites in the South – a divide even sharper than what he lived with in the North. As tensions, dissatisfactions, brutalities, and retaliations

grew in the late 50's and early to mid 60's, King called people to embrace nonviolent methods for rejecting the systemic racism in America, following the lead of both Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi's. The nonviolent resistance was also coined as non-cooperation and passive resistance, but in his article, "Experiment in Love"<sup>1</sup>, King writes that in the beginning of the civil rights protest movement, "none of these expressions was mentioned: the phrase most often heard was "Christian love." It was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love."

Following Christ into the dark reaches of society, and risking their lives to expose that which countered God's plan for us: both Martins lived Christ's legacy and the world has been forever changed. Because of these two men, people no longer empowered the oppressors by agreeing to the power they wielded. The first Martin managed to avoid assassination and witnessed the single church give way to a multitude of faith expressions. While the second Martin was assassinated in 1968 and did not live long enough to see generations of previously discriminated peoples be able to achieve their personal dreams, it was his call to action through the teachings of Christ that caused our nation, and the world, to see the mirror who they had become, and to chart a new course in human relationships.

For both causes, change did not come easy, was not fully realized, nor did it come cheaply. Humans, good and bad, resist change; and the more personal the change the more it is fought. Both men saw their words twisted to embolden the violent behavior they abhorred: Luther witnessed peasants rise up and destroy cities and property, especially within the church. King saw young black men band together as Black Power to violently demand their rights. For each man, the pain of being misunderstood, and watching people demand instant gratification through the destruction of others was heart wrenching. History teaches us that while change does come over time, it *takes* time and consistency of action to fully effect change. And then when we think we are working for each other, God's eye sees that deep inside we are really working to better ourselves – to better our position, our lives, our fortune, our family, or to assuage God for the wrongs we have done in the past.

Paul wrestled with the same in his letter to the Romans. While our heads know what we should do, our body and actions are not always able to keep up. "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do," he wrote (Romans 7:19). From Paul's writings Luther comprehended the bondage of the human will to sin: our slavery to Satan, the slave master, for as long as we live. As slaves to sin we are unable to resist sin's calling. It lures us like a siren; it makes us feel important and justified. But just as human slavery is a mere shadow of life, so is sin's justification is only fool's gold. God calls us to live to serve others; we are seduced by sin's call to better our lives. God's punishment for disobeying God's laws, passively or actively, violently or nonviolently, is death. We deserve this death because we can only place our interests first. So God came down and took the bullet for us. God stepped in front of the torturers, the assassins, suffered, and died for us so that we could live.

Our baptism into Christ's death, then, is God's promise to clothe us in Christ's robes at the end of our life; not because we managed to get our act straight, enact just and humane laws that forbid human slavery, or welcome religious tolerance. Not because we strive to allow all people to achieve human success, and certainly not when we resort to violence to better humanity by squashing the evil we think we see in others. God's righteousness is only given to us through our trust-faith that whatever our life is like, God provides for us even more than he provides for the sparrows in the air and the lilies in the field.

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<sup>1</sup> King, Jr., Martin Luther, "An Experiment in Love," *Jubilee*, September 1958, pp. 11ff.

Luther summed this up in his Small Catechism explanation to the first part of the Apostles Creed: I believe in God, the Father, the Almighty. Luther writes, *"What does this mean? I believe that God has created me and all that exists. He has given me and still preserves my body and soul with all their powers. He provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work and all I need from day to day. God also protects me in time of danger and guards me from every evil. All this he does out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, though I do not deserve it. Therefore I surely ought to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true."* Luther recited these words every day, through death threats and public condemnation, through the death of his children as plagues swept through town, while prince and peasant alike resorted to violence and the world slipped into bloody chaos over how to worship God, and while his own body suffered through sever pains. Luther always placed his loyalty, his fidelity, his trust for sustenance, in God, just as Martin Luther King held fast onto his dream of a day when all people would work together, blind to their differences but awakened to the joint call to work for God's mercy and justice for all peoples on this earth.

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## A PRAYER for This Week

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Oh most Gracious God, have mercy on me, I pray. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, nor take your holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a free spirit. Help me to see where justice and mercy are lacking for my neighbors. Embolden me, as you did Martin and Martin, to stand up for your Word, to fight for the rights of your people to live with dignity, peace, food, clothing, and housing. Help me, O God, to hear your voice calling me, and place your faith in me so I may answer. In Christ's name and only by your Holy Spirit I pray, Amen.

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## Activities & Questions to Ponder

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*Create space and time when family faith dialogue can develop and flourish.*

*The activities suggested below are to foster faith activities at home, and to help reinforce the week's lesson.*

- ✦ Where did your family come from? What is this history of your ancestors? With your children, teach them their history as a history to be proud of, regardless of how human their forebearers were. With them learn the good and bad of their ancestors, and take time as a family to pray God's forgiveness on those from whom you have received life.
- ✦ How are we different from each other? With your children list the ways that all within your family differ from each other. Celebrate that God loves diversity, as we see with snowflakes and nature – no tree or flower is the same as another, yet all are equally beautiful and loved by God.
- ✦ Who living / working around you is different from you – whether in looks, in life circumstances, in attitude, etc.? Take time to notice those around you, and how you react to your differences. Take time this week to pray for healing of wounds, forgiveness for hurts, and a clean and loving spirit for those with whom you differ.

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- ✦ This week, find at least one action you can do that can help bring a change to another person's life. Maybe it's through letter writing for justice and mercy for those who are in need; maybe it's by purchasing food for a food drive; maybe it's by adding a donation at church earmarked for a ministry developed to eliviate hunger or distribute aid to devastated people. Maybe it's in giving a long, strong hug to a person who is desparately in need of comfort. Maybe it's in asking forgiveness from someone you have hurt in the past. How can you bring God into someone's life this week? Write down your goals, share them with someone, and ask God to show you who needs you this week.

