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Recommended Citation
Bumpus, Scott, "Martin Luther King Jr. and the Power of His Ambitious and Influential Speeches" Whitworth University (2018).
https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/th314h/25
Martin Luther King Jr. and the Power of His Ambitious and Influential Speeches
By Scott Bumpus

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. His powerful, convicting prose lit a fire under all that listened. It was only a year after this speech that the Civil Rights Act was signed into effect. The “I Have a Dream” speech was not the only powerful speech that King delivered during his career as a pastor and as a leader of the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, King had a profound effect on the Civil Rights Movement through his ability to deliver a multitude of captivating speeches and sermons that communicated a consistent message of love and peace in the face of hate and violence.

King’s whole life had been leading up to him becoming one of the most influential speakers of the Civil Rights Movement. King grew up in Atlanta, where his father was the pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church. Because of his father’s pastoral role, “some of the most renowned pastors of the day stayed in his home during revivals.”¹ King took full advantage of his father’s job and all of the other pastors that came through the doors of Ebenezer by observing their actions and different styles of preaching. All throughout his childhood, King was learning the motions, language, and overall practices of preaching. The observing and learning did not stop when King left home. At the age of 15 King started college at Morehouse University. It was at Morehouse that King met Benjamin Mays “an influential figure in his own right. In the 1930s and 1940s he authored pioneering works in black religion, helped lay the foundation of black theology, and was a leader in ecumenical movements that coalesced into the World Council of Churches.”² Mays encouraged King to keep communicating the hope that many of the African American pastors and Civil Rights speakers were putting at the forefront, but to communicate the hope in a way that was more refined and informed. After his four years at Morehouse, King pursued more education at Crozer Theological Seminary, outside of Philadelphia, at the cost of turning down an assistant-pastoral role at Ebenezer. Unlike Morehouse, Crozer was a predominantly white university. However, this potentially intimidating environment did not faze King. In fact it was at Crozer that King began to find his voice against segregation and the role of the Church in this fight. In one of his assignments at Crozer, King wrote that the Church must “deal with great social problems” and help its congregants to “adjust to the complexities of modern society.”³ This vision that King had for the Church in his seminary years continued to develop as he went to get his PhD. from Boston College. Unlike many of the

³ Jackson, Becoming King, 41
African American pastors of his day, King went through several levels of school to become the most educated and skilled preacher and speaker he could be.

All of this education and preparation eventually led him to become the pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama at the age of 25. During his very first sermon at Dexter Avenue Church, King did not shy away from the difficult issues and did not sugar coat any aspect of his sermon even though this sermon was simply a tryout. In this sermon King spoke out against any aspect of self-importance that was existent in the church. He preached that "no man should become so involved in his personal ambitions that he forgets that other people exist in the world. Indeed if my life’s work is not developed for the good of humanity, it is meaningless and Godless." King wasted little time in carrying out his socially conscious agenda at Dexter. When he delivered his first sermon as their official head pastor, he called for social reform. King did not soften his preaching style even after he settled in as Dexter’s pastor. One of his congregants remembered that his preaching “always hit, and probably hit too hard.”

One sermon that likely hit the Dexter congregation hard is the one King delivered one Palm Sunday on March 22, 1959. In this sermon, King spoke on a most unexpected topic: the life and success of Mahatma Gandhi. He talked about the power of nonviolent response and the effectiveness of a nonviolent movement versus a violent protest. King stated that the Indian people were able to have a successful protest because Gandhi and the Indian people had “only decided to follow the way of love and understanding goodwill and refused to cooperate with any system of evil.” For King to preach on Gandhi in a Palm Sunday sermon definitely would have ruffled some feathers. King’s congregants were most likely expecting a sermon on the power of Christ; instead they got a sermon about a nonviolent protest that was organized by a non-Christian in a country across the globe. King thought that this was an appropriate sermon topic because he believed that Gandhi embodied the spirit of Jesus more than any other living person. Not only did this claim startle King’s congregants, but it also showed how highly he esteemed nonviolent and peaceful protests. By claiming that Gandhi was the person that embodied the spirit of Christ, King was also saying that nonviolent protests were the most Christlike thing that a person could do.

However, King did not simply challenge his congregation; he also spent a fair majority of his sermons encouraging his congregants while they were living in the midst of the struggle that was the Civil Rights Movement. In one of his sermons, “How to Believe in a Good God in the Midst of Glaring Evil”, King preached that “disbelief in a good God presents more problems than it solves. It is difficult to explain the presence of evil in the world of a good God, but it is more difficult to explain the presence of good in a world of no God.” This excerpt of King’s sermon shows his ability to walk the difficult line that was faced by his congregants and the greater African American population: on the one hand, the situation seemed bleak and they were
getting treated horribly, but on the other hand, they were called to show love and to hold on to the hope of God.

King did not only “talk the talk” of nonviolence; he also “walked the walk”. One prominent example of this, of King and the Civil Rights movement resorting to nonviolence in the face of terrible violence, is the march from Selma to Montgomery. The Montgomery Improvement Alliance, a Civil Rights organization that King was president of, organized a march from Selma to Montgomery but they were met with tear gas and nightsticks from the police as they tried to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge. As a result, the police placed a restraining order on the marchers so they would be unable to cross the bridge. However, when King and the marchers gathered again they marched straight toward the police barricade. Instead of trying to push forward, the entire group of marchers knelt down in front of the barricade and prayed. This demonstration of nonviolence gained national attention; the president even stepped in and demanded that the National Guard protect the marchers the next time they marched. Some might criticize that the nonviolence was a weak response and that it was the movement practically dismissing their own anger. However, King stated that “nonviolence provides a healthy way to deal with the understandable anger.” By saying this, King was able to affirm the anger that he and his congregants were feeling towards their situation, but he was also able to consistently call for a nonviolent response.

Maybe one of the most profound effects that nonviolence protest has on a movement is the ability to unite a previously divided community. By consistently preaching nonviolence, King and the rest of the Civil Rights Movement preachers were able to unite the movement. For instance, if King and the Civil Rights Movement had called for a militant reaction, they would have alienated everyone that was not able to participate in a violent response. However, by calling for nonviolent protest, King was able to unite the whole African American population in Montgomery and eventually the whole south. For example, through the Montgomery bus boycott, the African American community became a more cohesive unit across socio-economic class lines. This unity was the result of the African American community coming together in ways that they had never come together before. Through the carpools, people would ride in cars with people they would have never ridden with before. Since the African American community would not ride the buses to the white owned businesses in downtown Montgomery, more African American owned small businesses would be frequented. The nonviolent protests that King called for in his sermons and speeches not only united the community but they captivated the nation. By acting in a nonviolent manner, the leaders of the Civil Rights

11Martin Luther King, Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 64.
Movement helped ensure they would not receive any of the blame if or when things would turn violent. Through the method of nonviolent protest the Civil Rights Movement was able to “command the moral high ground, to persuade, and to wield power effectively.”12 King’s influential preaching of nonviolence and love allowed the Civil Rights Movement to unite and make political power plays.

King’s legacy is centered around his action and his ability to lead in the Civil Rights Movement. However, King’s true influence on the movement was his ability to preach, speak, and motivate any crowd to whom he spoke. From the influence of his father’s church to his ambitious preaching style at Dexter, King developed into a skilled orator, one that would use his gift to motivate and encourage the participants of the Civil Rights Movement.

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