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Powers and Principalities: King and the Holy Spirit

And Why Today's Activists Need the Power of Pentecost

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“I will pour out my Spirit on all people and your sons and daughters will prophesy, and 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 four hundred thousand members in four thousand churches in the United States and around the world.

Your Sons and Daughters Will Prophesy

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 people and

your sons and daughters will prophesy, and 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, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (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 that 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 of 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.

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 twentieth 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.

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 sixties had significant cultural consequences. During the next decade, various forms of an ingenious and complex art form, hip-hop and rap, emerged. It 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: “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.”

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 twentieth 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.



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Correction to the print edition: Eugene F. Rivers III is the founder and director of the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies.

