

## Martin Luther King's "Beloved Community"

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In 1956, the 27-year old Martin Luther King wrote that the real purpose and goal of the Montgomery bus boycott was not just about bus rides but about "reconciliation . . . redemption, the creation of the beloved community." And at the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957, King wrote in its newsletter that "the ultimate aim of SCLC is to foster and create 'the beloved community' in America where brotherhood is a reality." In his 1959 talk on Ghandi he said that "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, so that when the battle's over, a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor." And one final quotation, in 1966, two years before his tragic death, he wrote in the *Christian Century* "I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the objective that we seek in life. And I think that end or that objective is a truly brotherly society, the creation of the beloved community."

Well those are just a few quotations of dozens more that could be cited. This was a constant theme in Dr. King's message. It is great for us to reflect on this theme because people sometimes might think that King's purpose was narrowly focused on repealing racist, Jim Crow laws --- when he in fact wanted to go much farther and deeper and promote the law of love; that he refused the ways of violence --- when he also, at a deeper level, wanted to put into practice the ways of peace; that he fought against segregation --- when his deeper agenda was a life-giving integration, which we will explore in a moment.

So King was not just a prophet, denouncing and opposing evil, he was an apostle proclaiming and demonstrating the goodness of God. And this goodness is often depicted in the language of "the Beloved Community"

One of the ways Dr. King has inspired me is how he preached and taught the same set of values and insights, always deeply grounded in Jesus and Scripture, to both the professing Christians in the churches and to the diverse, pluralistic population in the community and the nation. The same basic message but two rhetorical strategies. To the church and its leaders, King could out-Bible anyone. A good example of this is his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" which was addressed to the clergy of the city in powerful biblical language and rich with Scriptural arguments. But then listen to his "I Have A Dream" speech and watch how he argues for the same deeply biblical values but now by calling on the people's knowledge of the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and their own basic human conscience.

This has been my goal all my life and career, to follow in this pattern. I want to have one consistent set of values and purposes and I want them deeply anchored in Jesus Christ and in my life of discipleship, prayer, and worship. When I am in the seminary or church setting I want to be able to argue with power from the text and from our Lord's teaching and example – in a blatant, obvious way. But in my neighborhood or my gym or in the business context I want to connect and communicate with other people on the basis of our shared humanity. I think at a seminary like Gordon-Conwell we need to talk about this dual-audience challenge a lot more than we do, and Dr. King would be a great guide for us all.

But on the specific topic of "the Beloved Community" I would like to reinforce and underline two basic biblical themes this morning.



The first theme is diversity. From cover to cover, the Bible affirms not sameness and homogeneity but difference and diversity.

- Creation: “all kinds”—with seed capacity to reproduce even more kinds
- God himself is diverse: Father, Son, & Spirit
- Humanity is man and woman in their difference
- Promise to Abraham is to be a conduit of blessing to all the nations of the earth.
- Jesus appoints 12.... Then 70... into all the earth, ends of the earth
- Pentecost..... spirit speaks not one new language but into languages of the nations
- Church is body with many members, different gifts... all necessary, all valuable
- Redeemed in Revelation from every people and tongue and nation ransomed
- All nations bring their glory into New Jerusalem

So God loves diversity, difference, distinctiveness. All have value and part of your value is that difference only you can bring to others. The Beloved Community is not going to be about sameness, uniformity, homogeneity

So to say it is about being “color-blind” is not adequate; color enjoying, color valuing  
Not gender-neutral but gender affirming and gender valuing

Second point is that our diversity is in service of a unity, a community, the Beloved community. We don't lose our individuality and uniqueness but neither do we keep it to ourselves. We rejoice in it, develop it, and bring it, share it with others: some of whom are a lot like us, many of whom are not much like us. It is what I call a “thick” diversity vs a thin diversity of the lowest common denominator. It is a community that enriches and blesses our own individual lives: good for me. It blesses others; we can do things together that are better than what we could do solo. It glorifies and blesses God.

This is not a tribal community but rather God's beloved community. Not an American nationalist community, not a racial or ethnic community but a community of all of God's people; Integration became a very negative concept for Malcolm X and for a lot of us because it meant integration in to community defined by the oppressor, white community, tribal community.

But that is not the Beloved Community. The Beloved Community of God represents, values, and includes all of God's children. We serve the God who created and who went to the cross for everyone. We serve a crossroads God who chose to come to the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe. So we have to be careful about the concept of color-blind. And also the concept of integration.

And finally I want to talk about love, suffering, and friendship in the Beloved community. Non-violence, non-violent resistance is a crucial means. Forgiveness is a critical component In King's discussion, agape love is the way: sacrificial, generous love for others, including our enemies. Agreed. But in this description, philea/friendship gets demeaned sometimes as a second-rate, reciprocal kind of thing, and I don't think that is quite right biblically. The afterlife is not dying on crosses. The afterlife is the feast table of friends from east and west, north and south. The message is that the goal, the beloved community is table love, friendship. But the means is cross-love, agape, forgiveness and generosity. The lie of the world is that you can get to the table without the cross. The promise of the Gospel is that God wants us to get to the table. But the only way there will take us by way of the cross. The Beloved Community is the goal, the cross is the way.