

Martin Luther King, Jr.: Our Spiritual Predecessor

Martin Luther King, Jr. grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, during a time when the South was segregated, whites from blacks.¹ As a preacher's kid, he was surrounded by family members who demonstrated Christian love inside and outside of the home.² This environment shaped his spirituality³ that laid the foundation for his roles as husband, father, pastor, and spokesperson for the nonviolent civil rights movement, which transformed the nation from segregation to integration and afforded African Americans the right to vote.

King's Christological core values is established by his deep commitment to Jesus Christ, which, as a spiritual leader, compelled him to confront the injustices of his day. Similar to Jesus and Paul, he faced an oppressive society that disenfranchised African Americans as the poor, outcast and the unwanted through the strategy of segregation.⁴ His famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" reflects the basis of confronting injustice from the moral authority of Scripture as exemplified by Jesus and the Apostle Paul. He writes, "I am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid."⁵ King often came to the aid of his people in the most racist cities of his era.

¹ Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1998), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 3-5.

³ Spirituality is defined as a continuing response to the reality of God's grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit and the scriptures working in tandem towards inward transformation, in a community of faith, for the sake of the world. Influenced by Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, ed., *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 11-2.

⁴ Efrain Agosto, *Servant Leadership: Jesus & Paul* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 17.

⁵ Carson, 189.

King's grounding in the Scriptures produced such quotes as, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," "Justice too long delayed is justice denied."⁶ King should be known more so as a spiritual leader than a political one because of his spiritual foundation. His prophetic words expressed during his era continues to ring true today amidst new forms of Jim Crow seen in police brutality and the mass incarceration of black and brown males on a large scale.⁷

⁶ Carson, 189, 192.

⁷ Cornel West, "Forward," in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness: Revised Edition*, Michelle Alexander (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012), x.