

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Day Luncheon Address
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{Disclaimer: This document was written as an address to be spoken rather than an essay to be read. Thus, some stylistic features may not conform to best writing practices. –CBS ☺}

Thank you, Carmille, for the privilege of offering an address at this gathering today. The juxtaposition of Dr/ Martin Luther King, Jr., Day immediately before the inauguration of President-Elect Barack Obama makes this an historically significant occasion in American history. It is also an important chapter in the turbulent history of ethnic relations in this country. So, thank you, for entrusting me with this privilege.

One of the worst things for a speaker to do is to begin a message with a disclaimer regarding one's minimal competence or total lack of qualification to speak to the topic at hand. To do so, I'm told, is to undercut one's credibility and give one's hearers no motivation to listen. Thus, I'll avoid that mistake.

Rather, I will tell you a little bit about my pilgrimage (though it is really only a beginning) into caring deeply about the issues before us today.

My concern for issues related to ethnic relations began in college but grew into a passion during my time serving as a pastor. Having grown up in Northern Maine in a very provincial setting, I had seen only three black people in my entire life until the age of seventeen. I went to college in Chattanooga, TN, and from the very first day of my arrival, getting off the interstate onto Ninth Street, a very poor inner-city area, I knew that I was "not home anymore"! My roommate turned out to be a black student from Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, just off the coast of Madagascar. His father was African, and his mother was Indian. Guy and I grew very close over the three years we shared the same room. I watched him experience American racism for the first time as he went with a college team to minister in a church in Alabama where he was refused the opportunity to sing because he was black. I remember how broken he was over the insanity, insensitivity and ungodliness of that event.

When I served as pastor of the Fairhaven Community Church in rural OH, I led my all-white congregation to share services and fellowship with an all-black church in Oxford. This experience greatly impacted the shape of my thought and ministry. At the same time, I was involved in the Promise Keepers movement which had the parallel themes of denominational and racial reconciliation; its sixth of seven "promises" states: "*A Promise Keeper is committed to reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of Biblical unity.*" My greatest memories were the 1996 Pastor's Conference in Atlanta's Georgia Dome where nearly 40,000 clergy gathered and repented of our denominational and racial segregation, and then the *Stand in the Gap* conference in Washington, DC, in 1997, where an estimated 500,000-1,000,000 men were in attendance. These events impacted my life significantly.

My next role was at Palm Beach Atlantic University, where I was privileged to serve on the diversity committee and direct an evening ministry program, which was highly integrated with students from African-American, Latino, Caribbean island, and Caucasian backgrounds. My wife and I also taught English to Latino immigrants so that they could succeed in our culture.

These experiences have led me to conclude that the Body of Christ should be at the forefront of leading reconciliation among diverse communities with Jesus Christ himself exalted as our model and basis for unity. There is no division that cannot be bridged by the powerful Gospel of Christ. In fact, our unity and love (our hospitality) should be the badge of our committed discipleship to Jesus Christ.

Though I have been slow to come to it because of my background and culture, I have learned through my pilgrimage to greatly honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the movement that he led. I have come to respect and honor...

- *The brilliance of his mind.*
- *The courage of his actions.*
- *The rightness of his cause.*
- *The power of his rhetorical skills.* (17 minute sermon, "I Have a Dream"; how long have I been speaking already? Have I said anything nearly as memorable?)

What was the key to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legacy? If it is possible to capture it in a single statement, I think it would go something like this:

He had a Clear Vision (Dream), which he Communicated Clearly and Pursued Vigorously, Courageously, Persistently, Patiently, Peacefully, and Sacrificially.

In preparation for this address, I have listened again to some of Dr. King's messages and read some of his letters. One of the observations that gripped me as I recently listened again to his "I Have a Dream" speech was that he rooted his dream in the American Dream. I can appreciate that as he appealed to the American culture at large he would root his dream in America's founding documents, the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, and our patriotic songs. This was wise and appropriate as he addressed the public square.

And in doing so, the conscience of the American people was struck by the conviction that "all men are created equal" and the promissory note that all men are "endowed by their creator with inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Dr. King declared that he had come to cash that promissory note written by the Founding Fathers for all men, including the "Negro" people; and as far as the general public was concerned, he did just that.

However, there have been a number of hold outs, bastions of resistance to Dr. King's Dream in our culture. It has been a slow and painful journey, but steps are being taken, and progress is being made.

And while I am willing to find the racism of some separatist groups and some geographical regions of our country understandable though inexcusable, I struggle to offer that same grace and understanding to individuals, people groups, and institutions that profess faith in Jesus Christ.

Yet, even here we are making progress – painfully-slow progress, but progress nonetheless.

The observance of MLK, Jr., Day has mirrored this resistance: The campaign for a federal holiday in King's honor began soon after his assassination in 1968, but it took 18 years to accomplish. Ronald Reagan signed the holiday into law in 1983, and it was first observed in 1986, under George H. W. Bush. At first, some states resisted observing the holiday as such, giving it alternative names or combining it with other holidays. It was officially observed in all 50 states for the first time in 2000. Hold-out states included Arizona, New Hampshire and South

Carolina; but now every state in the Union observes the Day. {See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King,_Jr._Day}

What causes me to grieve is that the secular culture “gets it” before we, in the church of Jesus Christ, “get it.” They have shown greater concern and taken greater initiative in seeking social justice than we have.

Perhaps most revealing in the press and public in its example is the case of Bob Jones University. This institution admitted its first black students in 1971, and changed its interracial dating policy in 2000, allowing for it only with parental permission. In more recent days, this past November 20, 2008, BJU published a statement of repentance of its past policies, calling them what they were: “*racist, characterized more by the segregationist ethos of American culture than by clear principles and precepts from the Bible.*” (See <http://www.bju.edu/about/race.html>) Though I find their slowness to respond a deep concern, at least they are making progress, and I appreciate their clear declaration of repentance.

What concerns me and disappoints me is how slow the Body of Christ has been to embrace Dr. King’s vision. And my concern and disappointment is not due to our lack of appreciation for the breadth of the American Dream, but rather the clear teaching in Scripture of God’s heart for the nations (from Gr., “ethnos”).

You don’t have to look too far to see this in the canon of Scripture. The story of the OT begins with the first couple, what Paul summarized in Acts 17:26, “From one man he made all the nations...” Covenants were made by God to bless all nations. To Abraham, he said, “And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” And though at times, Israel became confused, privatizing and institutionalizing God’s covenant blessings, they were intended to be a source of blessing and gladness for all nations.

The story of the Church in the NT is similar. Jesus offered the Good News of the Gospel to the nations, commissioning his disciples to witness regarding him “to the ends of the earth.” Deriving primarily from a Jewish context, the possibility for Gentile inclusion in the New Covenant community was readily apparent. Having opened the door of the Gospel to the Jews at Pentecost in Acts 2 and the Samaritans in Acts 8, Peter opened the door of the Gospel to Gentiles in Acts 10. I re-read this portion of Scripture yesterday, and the corresponding visions of both Peter and Cornelius and their convergence at the latter’s house, where Gentiles received the Holy Spirit and Jews and Gentiles enjoyed table fellowship, confirmed the broad intent of the Gospel. In Acts 11, the circumcised believers questioned the validity of the Gentiles’ conversion, but when Peter recounted the dramatic events of the preceding days, “...*They had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.’*”

Obviously, this is not the end of the story – it took longer for some to appreciate the greatness of this change than others; but gradually, the truth of a Gospel for all people sunk in. And this story is the foundation of Dr. King’s Dream and our shared Vision for the Church.

I believe in MLK’s Dream, but I believe with greater conviction and certainty in the rightness of his cause in light of all that I know about the Body of Christ and the Kingdom of God. It is the latter vision that should inspire the minds and spirits of believers in Christ, more than any patriotic dream.

When Martin Luther King, Jr., stated that he dreams “*of a day when his four children would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,*” he was speaking primarily about the public square. However, my concern is with the Church of Jesus Christ and our Christian institutions.

What will be necessary to “realize the ‘Dream,’” to cause this vision to come to fruition among American evangelicals and their institutions – churches, universities, etc.?

We will need to cultivate the following social and spiritual virtues:

1. **Attitudinally – We Need A Holy Discontentment** – with how things are presently.
 - I say “Discontentment,” because we cannot be content with the “status quo” when it is anything short of the ideals of Scripture. We need a posture of progress and improvement in our lives and institutions – never arriving, but growing. If we ever get to the point that we institutionalize and defend our present location, we are doomed to fail! {This was one of the greatest errors of the Jewish people in their quest to be a faithful people of God!}
 - I say “Holy,” because so often our discontentment can evolve into cynicism, bitterness, hatred and despair. The change has been slow in coming, the progress has been measured in millimeters not miles, but we must see that we are making progress and that the powerful Gospel of Jesus Christ remains our only hope (not humans or human institutions).
2. **Intellectually – We Need a Humble Self-Awareness.** We need a quality of self-criticism that is often absent from fundamental and evangelical individuals and institutions. *We have so much right that we think we have everything right!* We are excellent at critiquing others, but not ourselves. In fact, we consider anyone who critiques us or our institutions to commit sacrilege, if not heresy.
 - Our self-awareness will not grow until we are willing to listen humbly to others. Quite often we listen to the voices of others (whether in print or in speech) only to find out how they differ from us, and then we criticize them based on the difference. There is no evaluation of whether we are partly or wholly wrong in our views and attitudes; we presume ourselves to be right and ourselves to be the “*measure of all things.*” Others are wrong simply because they disagree with us. In this, we lack intellectual humility, and we have cut off the potential for growth.
 - We miss our “blind spots.” And we have them, for sure, usually derived from our culture.
 - Back in 2001, I supervised a student mission trip to Romania. We worked with a Romanian pastor whose Baptist church had a vital ministry in the city of Bucharest and a significant outreach to Gypsy children. We found the Romanian people to be most welcoming and gracious toward our students, and their ministry to the Gypsy children was both sacrificial and earnest. Yet, at the same time, I sensed a deep-seated prejudice against the Gypsies that permeated the culture and atmosphere. During the week I had several conversations with staff members and with one particular female staff member who demonstrated a beautiful Christian spirit and tremendous abilities in her leadership of the school. Yet, she also possessed a blind-spot of prejudice that was obvious to me,

but to which she was oblivious. One day when we were talking in her office, I remember her stating, *“It is terrible what has happened in your country between blacks and whites.”* I stated my agreement, but added, *“If I may be so bold, I do not see it much different from what I observe between the Romanians and the Gypsies.”* She took great offense to my challenge, and retorted, *“No, that is very different. Blacks can learn; Gypsies cannot!”*

- How foolish those words sound to us as we “critique” her blindness to her own cultural prejudices; yet, we are often blind to our own preconceptions, and we need enlightenment – and it will not come to us if we listen only to voices within our culture.
3. **Volitionally – We Need a Readiness to Repent.** One of the virtues that I have been seeking to cultivate in my own life is a teachable spirit before God. And as a proof of this teachable spirit, I have discovered that I also need to develop a “readiness to repent” when I discover that my thoughts and ideas are ignorant, lacking truth, or ignoble, lacking goodness and grace. As I learn of my deficiencies, I need to be ready to repent and embrace the truth. But one more virtue is needed:
 4. **Practically – We Need a Willingness to Take Initiative.** Until our discontentment, self-awareness and repentance reach the plane of practical and physical response, it is generally useless. Until we are willing to take initiative to DO as well as to THINK, then we will never achieve the dream or vision of God’s heart.
 - One of the attributes that I have come to love about God is that of *initiative*. You don’t read about it in most books on divine attributes, but its reality is so obvious that it is easily and often overlooked. It is a fundamental characteristic of his nature, expressed in his will to create, knowing that his creatures would fall and his creation would need redemption. It was initiative that moved God to return to the Garden of Eden following Adam and Eve’s sin, knowing that they were incapable of making right what they had destroyed. It is initiative that is the basis of all the covenant promises of redemptive history. It is initiative that moved the Second Person of the Trinity to descend to earth, become God-incarnate, assume a human body, and lay down his life for humanity. *“While we were yet sinners (still ungodly) Christ died for us.”* (Rom.5:8) It is initiative that moves the Holy Spirit to convince the human heart of sin, righteousness and judgment and to quicken it to new life when faith is conceived from the seed of the Word.
 - As Imitators of God, we are called to be people of Initiative – sharing the Good News, walking humbly, doing justice and loving mercy. We are a people called to BE and DO what God ordains. We are his representative authorities on the earth, his witnesses, his ambassadors, his messengers of reconciliation – between God and humans, and between all humans in Christ.

Here are some practical applications of these four virtues for our community here at Cedarville:

When we look around and see that there are only three full-time black faculty members among over 200 full-time faculty here at Cedarville University, our response should be the following: (1) a level of holy discontentment should grip our attitudes; (2) a humble self-awareness that this does not reflect Kingdom values should enter our minds; and (3) a readiness to repent should capture our wills. But until these virtues are realized in (4) a willingness to take initiative, they

come to nothing. A chastised spirit results, but no productive change. A level of humility, but no justice. A repentance of mind, but no tangible fruit. {Similar for Students/Staff}

If our greater University culture lacks the cultural sensitivity to understand the historical significance of these two days, January 19-20, 2009, MLK Day and Inauguration Day, our response should be: (1) a level of holy discontentment should grip our attitudes; (2) a humble self-awareness that this does not reflect Kingdom values should enter our minds; and (3) a readiness to repent should capture our wills. But until these virtues are realized in (4) a willingness to take initiative to make necessary changes in the way we think, dialogue and operate on this campus, they come to nothing. This is not to say that we cannot debate the politics and policies of our President-Elect (we should!), but the significance of these days in American history is seismic, not merely for blacks, but for all our citizens. The American Dream and the Dream of Dr. King has just reached a SCENE that is highly significant in the overall PLOT, and if we miss it by inattention, falling asleep or outright ignoring it, we will miss the essential MEANING of the Dream.

Cedarville University is on the threshold of some exciting days in terms of ethnic diversity. A major foundation in Cincinnati has agreed to send several students to us in the fall of 2009; bridges of trust and relationship are being built between our University and a number of African-American churches in the area; many staff, faculty and students seem poised for change. As we approach this threshold, we must realize that change does not come easy, and change has a tendency to reveal ugliness that was not noticed before. When we see this, (1) a level of holy discontentment should grip our attitudes; (2) a humble self-awareness that this does not reflect Kingdom values should enter our minds; and (3) a readiness to repent should capture our wills. But until these virtues are realized in (4) a willingness to take initiative to lead in change despite opposition simply because it is right and represents the heart of God and the Gospel, then we might as well not cross the threshold. It is better to not move forward at all, than to move forward and then retreat back to the “status quo” leaving disappointment and devastation in our wake.

Martin Luther King, Jr., knew quite well the truth of these words and the influence of what he called the “*moderate white*” who defended the *status quo*. He lamented their passivity in the midst of needed change and their calls for delay when urgent action was needed. He decried the fact that their knowledge of the truth was not in sync with their practice of the truth. They should have been his allies; but by their complacency and condemnation of his civil disobedience, they could be considered his enemies.

I dream of a day when conservative Christians will win the respect of their secular peers by taking leadership in social justice issues. I dream that our commitment to “doing good” will overcome our commitment to “maintaining the present order of things,” ethnically and economically. I dream that we will lead the causes of justice and goodness in the public square, but before we do, we must set our houses and institutions in order. Jesus reminded us that before we can remove specks from someone else’s eye, we must remove the beams from our own.

I don’t know about you, but I am excited about the future. My hope is not primarily about America, though I do pray that President Obama exercises divine wisdom and strength in his decisions and leadership, and that he is true to his Lord and his Christian commitments. We all should pray for him.

My excitement is for the Church of Jesus Christ. I think we stand on the cutting edge of significant change. I think evangelicalism is coming of age – we’re “getting it”!

My excitement is for Cedarville. I believe this University has a great past, but it also has a bright future. We’re “getting it”!

Yet, my excitement is tempered by the awareness that we have an adversary who often blinds our hearts and minds to the truth, and causes us to become distracted by many things. We also have a deep divide in our University culture. Only God’s Spirit can bring about the unity and consensus that we need for substantive change. I pray that what we as a University are currently experiencing in the public arena humbles us, quiets our inner debates, and gives us the will and determination to move forward in unity toward the lofty goals to which we are called to by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And if this occurs, Cedarville’s brightest days are yet its future days, and *to that end, let us, like Dr. King...*

...have a Clear Vision/Dream that We Communicate Clearly and Pursue Vigorously, Courageously, Persistently, Patiently, Peacefully, and Sacrificially.

And to that end, let us pray.