

REMARKS ON DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING

JANUARY 15, 2009

Introductory Remarks (Sen. Dave Schultheis):

In 1807 the British Commonwealth abolished its transatlantic slave trade after long years of perseverance against the deep entrenchment of slavery in the economy of the Empire. Disappointing setbacks and failures were suffered on many occasions before the British parliamentarian and philanthropist, William Wilberforce, and his colleagues savored the sweet victory for which they had so long prayed, hoped, and tirelessly worked.

In his young years Wilberforce had been deeply influenced by his friendship with John Newton, former slave-ship captain turned clergyman and author of the famous Christian hymn, "Amazing Grace." In time, Wilberforce became a Christian, and it was this personal conversion experience that caused him to embark on a 20-year-long battle against the practice of slavery. He died on July 29, 1833, just three days after hearing that the passage through Parliament of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 was assured. The British Empire had finally rid itself of the scourge of slavery.

In three short decades, a continent away, a similar battle would be raging against the evil of slavery, but in this conflict, brothers would take up arms against brothers. Shortly before his death, William Wilberforce had

penned these words: “America, as a Christian and a free country, cannot but entertain that slavery is alike incompatible with the law of God and with the well-being of man...”

Upon Civil War battlefields Wilberforce’s words would be tested...but in the end, the country would prove them true...slavery puts man at war with God and with other men and would no longer be tolerated in a Christian and free America. President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which was followed soon thereafter by ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. In 1865 slavery in America came to an end...but the battle for freedom was just beginning.

Sixty-four years later, Martin Luther King, Jr., was born in Atlanta on January 15, 1929. He was destined to rise up in the spirit of Wilberforce and Lincoln and take up that same banner for the cause of liberty and justice. This time the fight would be waged against segregation and racial discrimination. Dr. King went forward with unyielding conviction that God had created all men equal, taking his stand and strongly proclaimed that it was up to good men of conscience of every color to act selflessly and speak truthfully without guile in order to bring about the end of segregation in the United States.

So it is that each year on the third Monday of January, Americans commemorate the birth and life of Martin Luther King, Jr. As befits the

occasion, we remember his work and influence in the civil rights arena, and we honor the man behind the deeds.

Recently, a good friend of mine urged me to read the letter, authored in 1964 by Dr. King, while he was being detained in the Birmingham jail. I commend that letter to you, as it conveys Dr. King's heart. In it he answers criticism levied against him by pastoral peers within the Christian community.

Admittedly, I had never read his lengthy letter, written from the Birmingham jail, but as I pored over its contents, I was reminded of Dr. King's generational ties to the church...his grandfather and father were both Baptist ministers. From this legacy came the high value he placed upon freedom and equality and the reasons why he bristled at injustice. When he heard the words "liberty and justice for all," he heard a clarion call to righteous men everywhere to defend the least, the last, and the lost.

In his letter, Dr. King reflected upon the lives of great men and women of character whose words and deeds stirred within him a hope that one day from every corner coffee shop and courthouse across America, the sweet sound of "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last" would ring out.

While it remains true that Christians themselves have not always flawlessly embodied the ideals of their faith, their impulse to promote by effort

the principles of universal benevolence and pursuit of the public good has often wrought dramatic and positive change.

So I ask, “Can we properly honor Dr. King without also honoring the principles and ideals that inspired him? Please consider this quote from Dr. King’s letter:

“. . . I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their home town, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco–Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. . . I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Sen. Kevin Lundberg: Dr. King continues some paragraphs later to address the characterization of his actions as “untimely,” as well as his critics’ assertion that he and other demonstrators were willing to break laws. Listen to the answer Dr. King gives his detractors:

“This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that ‘justice too long delayed is

justice denied.’ We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.”

“...You (speaking to his critics) express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. One may ask: ‘How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?’ The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. . .One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’

Now what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law...Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality...Hence segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and awful.”

Sen. Scott Renfroe: From Dr. King's remarks what are we to conclude about the foundations of justice? That a man's keeping or breaking of any law is subject to his own views of that law, as to whether it is just or unjust? Or does Dr. King justify acts of civil disobedience, based upon the premise that supreme Truth has been established by God and exists over and above man-made codes? It would be hard to argue, I think, that Dr. King thought anything other than that just law derives its authority from the Divine.

Dr. King continues:

“Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely by the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire... In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience...Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God...”

Sen. Ted Harvey: Martin Luther King was a man who tirelessly co-labored with God and men to win the struggle against segregation. He eventually took some satisfaction in being branded as an “extremist,” for this label placed him in the company of his Lord and with men throughout the ages, whose lives had not only encouraged, but inspired him.

“Was not Jesus an extremist for love: ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.’ Was not Amos an extremist for justice: ‘Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.’ Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: ‘I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.’ Was not Martin Luther an extremist: ‘Here I STAND; I cannot do otherwise, so help me, God.’ And John Bunyan: ‘I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.’ And Abraham Lincoln: ‘This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.’ And Thomas Jefferson: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’

So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists will we be? Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?”

“...I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. . .they have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant... Abused and scorned as we may be, our destiny is tied up with America’s destiny. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.”

Sen. Dave Schultheis:

Dr. King was clear about the moral things of life and was unashamed to testify to them and to God from whom he believed that moral law comes. He was careful to do not only the “right thing,” but to do it for the “right reason,” and he placed the cause to which he had devoted himself into the providential hands of God.

Dr. King ends his letter with these words:

“One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great

wells of democracy, which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. . .Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow, the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

**Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,
Martin Luther King, Jr. ”**

Perhaps Abraham Kuyper, Dutch politician, journalist, statesman, and theologian at the turn of the 20th century, sums up best the heart and mind of Dr. King and explains why he was compelled to engage the fight and take his stand:

“When the principles that run against your deepest convictions begin to win the day, then the battle is your calling, and peace has become sin. You must at the price of dearest peace lay your convictions bare before friend and enemy with all the fire of your faith.”

As we honor the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., let us dedicate ourselves to serving selflessly on behalf of those whom we represent.

May God bless America and the work of our hands!