

**Martin SMEDJEBACK**

## *Three Questions about Two Extremists*

*The church is the largest social movement the world has ever known. But how much of Jesus' original message is alive in the church today? What happened to Jesus' radically nonviolent style of challenging the violence and injustices of his day?*

*There have been few times in history where we have seen Jesus' methods and message acted out in a Christian context. One instance was in the American South in the 1950s and '60s in the form of the Black Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr., among others.*

*Few people have been written about as much as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesus. Even so, there are three questions that have been sadly neglected. Reflecting on these questions could provide keys to what the church must do to regain its soul and to be effective in working for a world in which everyone is treated as a child of God.*

### **QUESTION 1: WHY WERE KING'S AND JESUS' MOVEMENTS SUCCESSFUL?**

*They each had a vision.* Martin Luther King, Jr. is probably best known for a speech he delivered in Washington D.C. in 1963. "I have a dream," he said, "that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

King often spoke about "the Beloved Community." He talked about it when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964: "A worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men." King was not speaking of utopia; he saw it as a realistic goal that could be reached by a critical mass of people who were trained and believed in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence.

Jesus was also a visionary. "No one will say: 'Here it is,' or 'there it is,'" he is recorded as saying by Luke, "because the kingdom of God is within you."

*They both resisted and invited.* In her book *Revolution and Equilibrium*, the

feminist and nonviolent theorist Barbara Deming writes about the two hands of nonviolence. One hand resists violence and repression. It says: "I will not tolerate that you violate my or others' human rights." The other hand warmly extends an invitation to anyone, even your worst opponent. It says: "I want to be your friend. I want to listen to you and understand you." It is nonviolence when both hands are used at the same time.

Both King and Jesus used this way of thinking and acting. The goal of King and the Black Civil Rights Movement was to end racism and segregation. But they didn't want to defeat or humiliate their opponents. The organizers of the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott were aware that the campaign would cause anger and even fear among those whites that saw the nonviolent action as a threat to their way of life.

Because of this, King appointed a committee to work on overcoming the bitterness that whites felt towards the black community. The committee spread the message of reconciliation through television and radio ads, articles, and direct dialogue with white citizens. "We must make friends out of them who are against us," said King; "We must make our motives clear and we must move from protest to reconciliation."

King believed that there was goodness in the most hateful person. "Just like the parable of the prodigal son who escaped to a distant country of sin and evil," he once preached, "I think that there is something that can make them come back to themselves. I think that Ku Klux Klan can change to be a Klan for God's Kingdom. That is the core of the Gospel."

Jesus also both resisted and invited. In the Bible, Jesus is often portrayed eating with "tax collectors and other sinners." Tax collectors were notorious for taking advantage of common people by putting tax money in their own pockets. Jesus ate with them even though he knew that their behavior was wrong.

This was criticized by the Pharisees. By their rules, an upstanding person would never share a table with sinners. Jesus openly violated this rule and invited

all people to him. This doesn't mean that he accepted their sinful behavior. There are several passages in the Bible in which Jesus' example changes the tax collectors. They give back the money they have stolen from the poor.

*They wanted to change both the person and society.* Both King and Jesus understood the importance of changing both the human heart and society. Today it isn't common that the same person or movement talks about both. Most churches tend to focus exclusively on the need for inner change. Most peace movements only address the need for change in society.

When King became a pastor he believed that Jesus' message applied only to person-to-person relationships. He didn't think it to be relevant on a societal level. Only when he learned about Gandhi did he understand that Jesus' message of love could work on every level of human existence.

In his famous 1967 speech "Beyond Vietnam," King said: "We are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway."

King wanted us to look critically into our own lives, but not to stop there. To solve the world's problems we must change ourselves, we must face and change our hate and egoism. But we must also struggle to change the structures of our society that lead to war, poverty and racism. George W. Bush said the day after the 11th of September 2001: "This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail."

If we, like King and Jesus, believe that every human being is both good and evil, then it is not so simple. Then we have to take a hard look at ourselves and see that we also have lots of things we need to improve in ourselves and in our lives. And if we can see both good and evil in ourselves, we can hopefully also see it in our opponents.



## QUESTION 2: WHY WERE KING AND JESUS KILLED?

*They used creative and effective non-violent actions.* It didn't satisfy King or Jesus to simply talk about beautiful visions. They put their words into action. They lived the way they wanted to see their future ideal society. The Black Civil Rights Movement used sit-ins: groups of black (and some white) men and women sat down together at lunch counters where they were forbidden to sit.

By their action they directly achieved the goal of the action to sit at the lunch counter regardless of the colour of their skin. This and other nonviolent methods spread like a wildfire across the American South and were successful in overturning segregation.

Jesus also employed various nonviolent actions. One example is described in the third chapter of the gospel of Mark. Jesus walks into a synagogue on the Sabbath and finds a man with a shriveled hand. "Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, 'Stand up in front of everyone.' Then Jesus asked them, 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then

the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus."

Jesus could have healed the man's hand outside or waited until the next day, but he chose to do it openly in the synagogue on the Sabbath in order to realize the kind of society he wanted to create: a society where religion would be for the people and not only for the scribes. Time and again Jesus broke the religious and political rules of his day when he considered them unjust.

If King and Jesus had been satisfied with holding speeches and doing less challenging actions, they wouldn't have been a threat to society and to those with power. Then they would not have risked their lives. But they chose direct, open, and nonviolent actions because they knew that if they didn't, not much would change for the better.

*They were extremists.* While in Birmingham in 1963, King was arrested for demonstrating without a permit. Sitting in the city jail, he read a newspaper ad placed by local clergy and calling for an end to public demonstrations. While injustices existed, they should be settled in court, not the streets. King and his colleagues should not break the law, they said; that is only done by extremists.

In his famous response, King wrote: "But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as

I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. 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 who spitefully 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' ... So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will 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? ... Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists."

King was right that both Jesus and he were extremists. They had extreme visions and extreme methods to reach the world they were dreaming of. This is very dangerous in the eyes of power, even if you are an extremist for love.

*They challenged mighty men.* Almost from the first day of the bus boycott in Montgomery, King and his family began to receive threats. At the worst period they got around 40 death threats per day. At the same time he found support from national media and some political leaders in Washington D.C. who thought that the segregation in the South was old-fashioned and embarrassing.

After ten years of involvement in the



### Suggested Reading

KING Martin Luther Jr., "Beyond Vietnam." [www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm)  
 Acceptance speech and lecture at the Nobel Peace Prize award.

[www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html)  
 Letter from a Birmingham Jail. [www.thekingcenter.org/prog/non/Letter.pdf](http://www.thekingcenter.org/prog/non/Letter.pdf)  
 WALLIS Jim, God's Politics. San Francisco, 2005.

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Civil Rights Movement, new challenges arose which were difficult for him to avoid. He was confronted by the young and desperate black men in the ghettos across the U.S. King told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. They answered: "But what about Vietnam? Is not our own nation using massive doses of violence to solve its problems?"

"I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos," King reflected in his speech *Beyond Vietnam*, "without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today my own government." When King began to criticize the war and the economic injustice in his country he lost the support of the national press and leaders in Washington. He was harshly attacked by the press and persecuted by the FBI. King's family and many others believe that powerful leaders were involved in his murder.

Jesus also challenged the leadership in his country. He was critical in words and deeds towards both the religious and political establishment. Seldom had there been anyone who dared to challenge the powers with openness, action and love. The leaders were afraid that he would gain enough support from the people to be able to take away their power.

### **QUESTION 3: WHY ARE KING'S AND JESUS' MOVEMENTS NO LONGER SUCCESSFUL?**

It can be argued whether or not King's and Jesus' movements continue to be successful today. The Black Civil Rights Movement achieved a lot. It succeeded in overturning most of the racist laws that governed the American South. But the struggle that King became involved in during the last years of his life the struggle for economic justice and peace was not so successful. The gap between rich and poor is still enormous, both in the U.S. and around the world. The U.S. is still arguably "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world," with about half of the world's military investments.

Jesus began what is today the largest social movement on the planet: the worldwide Church. But did it turn out the way he had hoped? Did it become a movement that challenged violence and injustice? Did it become the movement for the love and peace that he

preached? We have it in bits and pieces in the church today, but in general it is difficult to see. I think there are two reasons why their movements are not successful anymore.

*We have only absorbed a small part of King's and Jesus' message.* Most people know that King had a dream. If you know a little bit more about King, you know that he struggled for black civil rights in the U.S. Often that is all people know. There are few people who know that he worked hard against war and poverty. We have made King's message safe and insignificant by reducing him to a dreamer.

I don't think this is all a matter of chance. Those with political and economic power want to talk about King as a good rhetorician and nice anti-racist organizer but not about King as a harsh critic of the capitalist system and a radical nonviolent activist against war and poverty.

I also think that all of us (at least some parts of us) prefer to think about King as a dreamer. We can all be dreamers. Dreaming doesn't demand any changes from us. If we think about King's challenging words and how many of us are accomplices to the problems of war and economic injustice, then we might have to begin to question our own way of life, which can be very demanding and unsettling.

When it comes to the message of Jesus, many Christians tend only to see it as a private matter, something between God and myself. Jim Wallis, one of the founders of the Sojourners, an American progressive Christian movement for peace and justice, writes in his latest book *God's Politics*: "Restricting God to private space was the great heresy of the twentieth-century American evangelicalism."

The movement Wallis represents works for an awakening of the Church to regain the message of peace and justice in the Bible. He writes in the same book: "Our religious congregations are not meant to be social organizations that merely reflect the wider culture's values, but dynamic counter-cultural communities whose purpose is to reshape both lives and societies."

*In the work for a better world, there is a need for risk taking and willingness for sacrifice.* Maybe what makes people most reluctant to get involved in the work for peace and justice is that this work sometimes requires both risk and

sacrifice. When we involve ourselves in the struggle, it can mean that we don't always get the comfortable life that TV commercials promise us. It isn't an attractive message for us in the time of egoism and ever-increasing consumption.

But both King and Jesus saw the willingness to sacrifice as something central in their message and in their lives. "You don't get to the promised land without going through the wilderness," King said. "There can never be growth without growing pains." Jesus willingly accepted pain in his life in order to create positive change.

Pain and sacrifice can never be a goal in itself; on the contrary! It is because you want everyone to have the right to life and not have to experience pain that you choose to work nonviolently for others. But risky and painful situations can come up indirectly in an active nonviolent struggle for peace and justice. Today there are not many people in the church who are prepared, like King and Jesus, to sacrifice something of their lives to the nonviolent struggle for a better world.

### **A FUTURE BELOVED COMMUNITY?**

Not unlike in the times of Jesus and King, we see injustice and war all around us. What is different from their time is that the nonviolent movements are greater than ever. There are many people who are actually willing to sacrifice something of their lives for others. But it isn't happening in the churches primarily. In the best-case scenario, we can see churches supporting nonviolent movements and activists. In the worst-case scenario, churches are actively working against progressive nonviolent movements.

When I read the Bible and when I see how King and his sisters and brothers in the struggle for civil rights used their faith as an instrument for positive change, then I have hope in what the Church one day can be. Imagine a world where the Church, in co-operation with other religious institutions and movements for social change, peace and justice, would actively, nonviolently and lovingly work as a joint body to change the very structures of our society.

What a powerful and mighty force it would be! I truly believe that we then would begin to see King's Beloved Community, or if you will, the Reign of God.

