

# LIVING THE DREAM

Adapted from speech given by David L. Williams (1/11/16)

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed on April 4, 1968 in Memphis Tennessee the thought for some was that hope had died. Yet hope did not die! Because of the gospel of Jesus Christ we always have hope.

The words that Dr. King spoke and the dream he shared with us transcended the man. They were grounded in the words of the OT Prophets and Jesus' sermon on the mount with a call for justice and righteousness. They came from the heart of a man who believed that the gospel could change not just individuals but a nation if we would only embrace it.

## **Dr. King Challenged America to be who She Professed to be**

Just as God raised up Moses and sent him to Pharaoh with a call to 'Let my people go!, God's hand and Spirit moved upon and in a young black preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ to challenge the insidious racism and injustice of this nation towards her 20 million negro citizens. 240+ years of slavery and 100 years of unequal laws and treatment had deeply entrenched racism, injustice and inequality in the soul of America that affected not only individuals but the very power structures in our nation (government, business, education, etc.). The blacks in America were not looked at as equal and did not feel free.

Dr. King confronted the power structures of America. In essence he was calling America to live out who she professed to be from the famous words penned by Thomas Jefferson found in the Declaration of Independence 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.' In his 'I Have A Dream' speech he says 'It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'

In a nation with a Judeo-Christian heritage this should not have been the case. Dr. King did not believe that human dignity came from a person's color, race or ethnicity. It derived from the fact that every person is created in the image of God. That is what gives every human being their value, worth and dignity. And in a country whose Pledge of Allegiance declares ...'one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all' it was unthinkable to Dr. King for blacks or any other group of people to be treated as 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizens. So he spoke up, marched, protested, went to jail and was criticized for the sake of justice and the dignity of every man.

## **Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement Brought Great Change to America**

From the efforts of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others in the civil rights movement we have made tremendous strides forward in our nation. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibited racial discrimination in voting. In the last 50 years blacks and other minorities have been afforded access and opportunities that our ancestors may have never even dreamed were possible. There are blacks who have made it to the heights of education, business, media, Hollywood, sports, medicine, non-profits, law and politics. When Barack Hussein Obama was inaugurated the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009 it was a sign to many that America was over her race problems. Were we

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finally seeing the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream right before our eyes? Or were we missing the forest for the trees?

## The Civil Rights Movement Birthed out of the Church not the Political Arena

Most people fail to realize that the Civil Rights Movement was birthed out of the church. But sadly it was not fully embraced by the whole church in America. Blacks who were oppressed led the way towards justice and equality while many whites in the church were silent and indifferent about the unjust and at times inhumane treatment of blacks in America (there was a minority of whites who supported the cause). Others called Dr. King to wait or to slow down. But to him 340 years was far too long already for a country that claimed that all men are created equal and his famous ['Letter from a Birmingham Jail'](#) was a compelling challenge to white Christian leaders to live out the gospel in the pursuit of justice for all people.

With a polarized church, divided by race on these issues, the political process was looked at by many as the way for the dream of Dr. King to be lived out. The thought was that if we can create policies that close the gap economically and educationally then doors of opportunity will open for blacks to have and enjoy the same treatment and privileges as whites. This will naturally cause the division between the races to close right? For this will lead to blacks and whites going to the same schools, living in the same neighborhoods and working in the same companies.

## Politics has failed to Bring about Dr. King's 'Dream'

Fifty years later the overall disparities between blacks and whites are just as huge now as back in 1963 when Dr. King delivered the 'I Have a Dream' speech.

### **50 years after the 'I Have a Dream' speech:**

- Black unemployment rate consistently 2 times as high for past 50 years (1960 5% whites vs. 10.9% blacks, 2013 6.6% whites vs. 12.6% blacks)
- Gap in household median income has not narrowed last 50 years (2010 whites \$54,620 vs. blacks \$32,068)
- Wealth (median net worth) of white households was nearly 13 times that of black households (\$141,900 vs. \$11,000) – [Pew Research Center internet article 12/12/2014](#)
- 2011 black households in poverty nearly 3 times white households (27.6% vs. 10%)
- blacks more likely to live in areas of concentrated poverty (45% blacks vs. 12% white – 2006 – 2010 average)
- 60 years after Brown vs. Board > 75% of black public school students attend majority-minority schools (schools more segregated than 1980's)
- Racial disparity rates incarceration bigger than in 1960's (incarceration rate for black men 6 times higher than white men) per 100,000 US residents 1960 whites 262, blacks 1,313; 2010 whites 678, blacks 4,347

(Statistics from [Washington Post internet article 8/28/2013](#) unless otherwise noted)

What we have found out is that true love and justice cannot be won in a court of law, achieved by an act of legislation or gained from an executive order. Looking to government rather than God has led us away from transcendent truth that all men are equally created and have equal responsibility before God

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(see Charles Gilmer article – [‘Martin Luther King’s Solution to Racism’](#)). It has left us with a moral relativism where different groups of people decide what is right for them as opposed to what is right for others. We’ve been taught to tolerate one another and our differences with the hope that we’ll all just get along. We’ve learned to smile in each other’s faces and talk behind and stab each other in the back. Everything appears to be fine on the surface until the agenda of one group begins to infringe, deny or revoke the rights of another. This leads us to conflict and hostility. What we thought would make our lives better has only further alienated us from one another.

As we gather together at the beginning of 2016 with our nation on the brink of boiling over with racial tension and unrest. It is easy for us to think that this is because of the recent incidents we’ve seen through the media of the violent and often unjust deaths of young black men such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice and LaQuan McDonald. This has led to the cries of a community for justice and the #blacklivesmatter movement. These things are a symptom and not the root of the problem. America’s racial problems, at the core, are not about bad policing in our urban centers and the disparity in economics and education thus the government cannot provide an adequate solution.

## **The Church does not appear to be the Answer Either**

The root is the sinfulness of man’s heart from which come racism, injustice, partiality, prejudice, unforgiveness, bitterness, resentment and vengeance. Dr. King knew this as he writes in his book ‘Strength to Love’ that “Man is a sinner in need of God’s forgiving grace. This is not deadening pessimism, it is Christian realism.”<sup>1</sup> There is only one entity in this nation/world that has an adequate answer to this problem – the church of Jesus Christ. Yet the world will never see the gospel as an answer to the racial divide as long as we continue to live, worship and minister as a church polarized by race and ethnicity.

Not long after giving his famed “I Have A Dream” speech during the March on Washington in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. was invited to lecture on race at Western Michigan University. In a question-and-answer session after the lecture, King said Christians in the United States fail to live out the tenets of their faith. “We must face the fact that in America,” he said, “the church is still the most segregated major institution in America. At 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing and Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation. This is tragic.”<sup>2</sup> Sadly little progress has been made in the last 50 years. Nearly 8 in 10 people worship at congregations that are composed of 80% of a single racial/ethnic group<sup>3</sup>. How heartbroken would Dr. King be if he were alive to see the church today?

## **Jesus made it Possible for the Church to ‘Live the Dream’**

I think that Jesus’ heart is broken. I believe that He cries and weeps over what He sees of the church today, particularly here in America. Jesus prayed that we would be brought to complete unity. Why? So that the world would know that He is the One sent by the Father (see John 17:20-23). The divide in the

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<sup>1</sup> Page 51.

<sup>2</sup> [Sunday Morning in America Still Segregated – and That’s OK With Worshipers](#) (Lifeway Research 1/15/15)

<sup>3</sup> [Many U.S. congregations are still racially segregated, but things are changing](#)

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body of Christ seems so wide. But the divide has already been overcome. The divide has been overcome by this gospel that has been entrusted to us that we have been called to take to the world.

The greatest divide that has ever existed is not the divide between blacks and whites in this nation or between various people groups in other places around the world against one another. The greatest divide that has ever existed is between sinful humanity and the One and only God who is holy beyond our imagination. This has left us alienated, hostile and separated from God and deserving of His wrath. In order to provide a solution to our predicament God sent His Son, Jesus, into this dark, divided and hate-filled world. Jesus left from the glory that He shared with the Father from before the foundation of the world and veiled His glory in human flesh. He then obeyed His Father perfectly and went to a cross to shed His blood and die for the sins of the world. His blood poured out would be the payment to purchase us so that we could be reconciled to God and have peace with Him. For those who put their faith in Jesus they become children of God.

Here in America we focus so much on the fact that people can have a personal relationship with God. It seems that we have forgotten that the gospel is about more than just me and God. This gospel not only gives us peace with God but it brings us peace and into a relationship with those who are different from us (even people groups that have a history of being divided and hostile towards each other). Paul shares this aspect of the gospel in Ephesians 2:11-22. He writes about the greatest divide in humanity between Jew and Gentile who were alienated and separated from one another by culture, by religion and by race. They hated one another but Jesus Christ came to be their peace. By His death on the cross He did away with the hostility. He brought them together to be one new man - a new humanity in Him. He made it possible for every believer regardless of race, ethnicity or culture to have access to the Father by one Spirit. Christ followers are now citizens of one household, members of one Kingdom under One King and individual members of one body with one head Jesus Christ.

Together as that one body we are called to live in such a way that it points people to the head – Jesus. We go forth telling people that God is love and that God is one (though He is in three persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and they do not see us loving one another or living as one. It is no wonder that the world is cynical about the church having an answer for the race problems that we are experiencing in America today.

We Christians must realize that the gospel gives us a new identity that is no longer tied to our race/ethnicity, culture, gender or socio-economic status. Our new identity is Christ (Galatian 3:26- 28). We all have the same status before God. There is no longer us and them. It is only us. There are no races, ethnicities or cultures that are to be more dominant than any other. There are people from every nation, tribe and tongue who all have an equal place at the table and who are called to live out this unity in our manifold diversity.

## **It is time for the Church to ‘Live the Dream’**

Dr. King once wrote “Man filled with God and God operating through man bring unbelievable changes in our individual and social lives.”<sup>4</sup> God gives us the power to love one another as He has loved us, to repent of our sins (nation, church, individual), to forgive others as He has forgiven us, to esteem others

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ‘Strength to Love’ pg. 51

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better than ourselves and to look to the interests of others, to seek justice for others, to preach the gospel to the poor, to bind the broken hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of prisons to those who are bound across racial/ethnic boundaries.

So let me ask you two questions:

1. Will we, the church, once again, like in the 1960's, miss this watershed moment to shine the light of Christ?
2. Or will we choose to be courageous and live the dream no matter what it costs?

My prayer is that the church will rise up to be all that Christ redeemed her to be so that in the near future these modified words of the ending of Dr. King's 'I Have a Dream' speech can be said of us: *"And when this happens,...we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing..., "One at last! **One** at last! Thank God Almighty, we are **One** at last!"*

God bless you as you strive to live the dream!