

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1951, Martin Luther King, Jr., twenty-two years old and in his final year at Crozer Theological Seminary, accepted an admission offer from Boston University's Graduate School. Because King had already completed seven years of higher education, his decision to continue with graduate studies in theology set him apart from the great majority of Baptist ministers. His father and grandfather had furthered their careers by acquiring degrees from Morehouse College, but in 1951 less than ten percent of African-American Baptist ministers had pursued formal seminary training, and only a few dozen had earned doctoral degrees. Though the elder King still wanted a permanent co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, he was pleased that his son "was moving forward into a modern, advanced sort of ministry" and thus was willing to provide financial support for graduate study in systematic theology. Even as his son's theological studies provided a gloss of erudition, King, Sr., remained convinced that the stamp of the African-American Baptist church on his son's religious beliefs was indelible. He admired his son's ability to combine "the Bible's truths with the wisdom of the modern world" but still saw him as "a son of the Baptist South." The young minister's occasional sermons at Ebenezer displayed, in the opinion of his admiring father, "the probing quality of his mind, the urgency, the fire that makes for brilliance in every theological setting."¹

The academic papers that King, Jr., wrote during his three years at Crozer Theological Seminary record his movement from teenage religious skepticism toward a theological eclecticism that was consistent with his Baptist religious roots. Never having had an "abrupt conversion experience," King felt that his religious beliefs resulted from the "gradual intaking of the noble ideals" of his family and community. "Even in moments of theological doubt I could never turn away" from those ideals, he insisted.² Growing up as the son and grandson of preachers and choir directors, King had acquired his basic convictions through daily immersion in the life of Ebenezer. "Religion has just

1. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., with Clayton Riley, *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), p. 147. For an early study of the black Baptist ministry, see Ira De A. Reid, "The Negro Baptist Ministry: An Analysis of Its Profession, Preparation, and Practices," 1951, BEMP-DHU: Box 77. See also Charles Shelby Rooks, *Revolution in Zion: Reshaping African American Ministry, 1960-1974* (New York: Pilgrim, 1990).

2. Martin Luther King, Jr., "An Autobiography of Religious Development," in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 1: *Called to Serve: January 1929-June 1951*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, and Penny A. Russell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 361, 363. King later acknowledged that at an early stage in his religious development he was embarrassed by "the emotionalism of much of Negro religion, the shouting and stamping. I didn't understand it" (King, quoted in William Peters, "Our Weapon Is Love," *Redbook*, August 1956, p. 72).

Introduction been something that I grew up in," he noted. The example of his "saintly" grandmother, Jennie Celeste Williams, an influential figure at Ebenezer, was instrumental in his religious development, while his father "also had a great deal to do with my going in[to] the ministry. He set forth a noble example that I didn't min[d] following."³

In addition to influencing his choice of a career, King's family and church shaped his theological perspective. As King's undergraduate mentor, Morehouse president Benjamin Mays, wrote in his survey of religious beliefs in the African-American community, there were two traditions of thought about God, one that enabled blacks "to endure hardship, suffer pain, and withstand maladjustment" and another that motivated them "to strive to eliminate the source of the ills they suffer."⁴ King's family connected him to the latter tradition, which rejected the notion that Christians should abide this world while awaiting a better one in heaven. "The church is to touch every phase of the community life," King, Sr., once urged his fellow black Baptist ministers. "We are to do something about the broken-hearted, poor, unemployed, the captive, the blind, and the bruised." The elder King exhorted his colleagues to become politically active: "God hasten the time when every minister will become a registered voter and a part of every movement for the betterment of our people."⁵

Theological study became the means by which King, Jr., reconciled his desire to pursue a social gospel ministry with his deep-seated distrust of the emotionalism that sometimes accompanied Baptist religious practice. He later recalled that at the age of seven he had formally joined Ebenezer in the midst of a revival meeting "not out of any dynamic conviction, but out of a childhood desire to keep up with my sister." He rejected scriptural literalism, explaining that he "couldn't see how many of the facts of science squared with religion."⁶ At one point as a teenager, he even denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus. His religious doubts began to subside, however, when Morehouse professor George D. Kelsey reassured him "that behind the legends and myths of the Book were many profound truths which one could not escape."⁷ Kelsey and Mays provided King with role models of academically trained ministers, and their example inspired him to continue his theological studies. "Both were ministers, both deeply religious," King said in a later interview, "and yet both were learned men, aware of all the trends of modern thinking. I could see in their lives an ideal of what I wanted a minister to be."⁸

Drawn to Crozer because of its liberal reputation, King deepened his theological understanding while at the seminary. By the end of his studies there,

3. King, "Autobiography of Religious Development," in *Papers* 1:361, 359, 363.

4. Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938), pp. 23-24.

5. King, Sr., "Moderator's Annual Address, Atlanta Missionary Baptist Association," 17 October 1940, CKFC.

6. King, quoted in Peters, "Our Weapon Is Love," p. 72.

7. King, "Autobiography of Religious Development," in *Papers* 1:362.

8. King, quoted in Peters, p. 72.

his papers had begun to express an awareness of the limitations of social gospel theology, even while King identified himself with theological perspectives that stressed transcendent moral values and the importance of religious experience. His seminary program included many courses on theology with George W. Davis, a Baptist theologian who combined social gospel teachings with a critical understanding of modern theology. King initially believed that Christian liberalism provided answers to “new problems of cultural and social change,” unlike its theological adversary, fundamentalism, which sought “to preserve the old faith in a changing milieu.”⁹ As he continued his studies, though, King found his initial uncritical attraction to liberal theology “going through a state of transition.” His personal experience with “a vicious race problem” had made it “very difficult . . . to believe in the essential goodness of man”; nevertheless, his recognition of “the gradual improvements of this same race problem” led him “to see some noble possibilities in human nature.” While continuing to reject biblical literalism and doctrinal conservatism, King was becoming, he acknowledged, “a victim of eclecticism,” seeking to “synthesize the best in liberal theology with the best in neo-o[r]thodox theology.”¹⁰

Davis also introduced King to personalism, a philosophical school of thought that satisfied King’s desire for both intellectual cogency and experiential religious understanding. In an essay for Davis, King reviewed a text by Boston University professor Edgar S. Brightman, a leading personalist theologian. Excited by Brightman’s analysis of various conceptions of God, King reported that he was “amazed to find that the conception of God is so complex and one about which opinions differ so widely.” Conceding that he was still “quite confused as to which definition [of God] was the most adequate,” King decided that Brightman’s personalist theology held the greatest appeal.¹¹ Its emphasis on the reality of personal religious experience validated King’s own belief that “every man, from the ordinary simplehearted believer to the philosophical intellectual giant, may find God through religious experience.”¹² His reading of Brightman suggested to him that his early skepticism may not have undermined his inherited religiosity:

How I long now for that religious experience which Dr. Brightman so cogently speaks of throughout his book. It seems to be an experience, the lack of which life becomes dull and meaningless. As I reflect on the matter, however, I do remember moments that I have been awe awakened; there have been times that I have been carried out of myself by something greater than myself and to that something I gave myself. Has this great something been God? Maybe after all I have been religious for a number of years, and am now only becoming aware of it.¹³

9. King, “The Sources of Fundamentalism and Liberalism Considered Historically and Psychologically,” in *Papers* 1:240.

10. King, “How Modern Christians Should Think of Man,” in *Papers* 1:274.

11. King, “A Conception and Impression of Religion Drawn from Dr. Brightman’s Book Entitled *A Philosophy of Religion*,” in *Papers* 1:410, 411.

12. King, “The Place of Reason and Experience in Finding God,” in *Papers* 1:234.

13. King, “A Conception and Impression of Religion,” in *Papers* 1:415–416.

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Brightman's personalism reassured King that he had experienced God's powerful presence in his own life even without the benefit of an "abrupt" religious conversion. Even as personalist theology became the focus of King's studies, it strengthened his belief that experience as well as intellectual reflection could be the basis of religious belief. "It is through experience that we come to realize that some things are out of harmony with God's will," King wrote in an essay for Davis. "No theology is needed to tell us that love is the law of life and to disobey it means to suffer the consequences."¹⁴

To continue his theological training, King applied to Edinburgh University, which accepted him, and to Yale University, which did not, but it was to Boston University, a stronghold of personalism, that he was particularly attracted. Boston was the alma mater of Raymond Bean, one of King's favorite professors at Crozer. He indicated in his application that Bean's "great influence over me has turned my eyes toward his former school."¹⁵ He was also aware of several African Americans who had studied at the school, which had a long-established reputation as a hospitable environment for black theology students.¹⁶ Unlike Crozer, where there were less than a dozen African-American seminarians, Boston University had a larger number of black students, and its close proximity to other colleges helped to create a community of African-American students with whom King could interact.

King knew that at Boston he could refine his personalism in classes with Brightman and other noted theologians. King explained that he had a "general knowledge" of systematic theology but sought "intensified study" in graduate school to gain "a thorough grasp of knowledge in my field." He announced that theology, his chosen field, should be "as scientific, as thorough, and as realistic as any other discipline. In a word, scholarship is my goal."¹⁷ Even while expressing a desire to teach theology after he completed his studies, King had already begun to incorporate his theological training into his preaching. King's studies at Crozer had encouraged him to question many aspects of his religious heritage, but the church of his parents and grandparents had imparted an understanding of God and the Christian mission that theological learning enhanced rather than displaced. He later explained that personalism's "insistence that only personality—finite and infinite—is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me a

14. King, "Place of Reason and Experience," in *Papers* 1:234.

15. King, Fragment of Application to Boston University, in *Papers* 1:390.

16. In the fall of 1950, when considering various graduate schools, King met Crozer alumnus Samuel D. Proctor at a campus lecture and learned about Proctor's training at Boston University, where he had received his Th.D. that year. Dean Walter Muelder later estimated that Boston University awarded half of the doctorates in religion received by African Americans during the decade after King's arrival. He explained: "When the reason for this was sought, blacks said to me, 'We know where Boston University stands and the word gets around'" (Walter G. Muelder, "Philosophical and Theological Influences in the Thought and Action of Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Debate and Understanding* 1 [1977]: 183). See also Muelder, "Recruitment of Negroes for Theological Studies," *Review of Religious Research* 5 (Spring 1964): 152–156.

17. King, Fragment of Application to Boston University, in *Papers* 1:390.

metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.”¹⁸



In the fall of 1951, after driving from Atlanta in the green Chevrolet his father had given him and moving into an apartment on St. Botolph Street in Boston, King immersed himself in his courses at Boston University's School of Theology. During his first semester he came into contact with the leading proponents of personalist theological studies. Edgar Brightman had studied with Borden Parker Bowne, the first notable American advocate of personalism and a member of Boston's faculty until his death in 1910. Since 1925 Brightman had held an endowed chair at Boston named for his mentor. Sixty-seven years old when King arrived, Brightman taught the core course on the philosophy of religion, assigning his own work, *A Philosophy of Religion*, as the required text.¹⁹ Under Brightman's guidance, King would continue developing his theological outlook by critically evaluating the ideas of leading theologians from a personalist perspective. He also took two courses—one on personalism and the other a directed study in systematic theology—with L. Harold DeWolf, a Methodist minister and Brightman's protégé. DeWolf had taught at Boston University for twenty years and would become King's most important mentor after Brightman's death in 1953.²⁰

18. King, *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 100.

19. Borden Parker Bowne (1847–1910) taught at Boston University in the Liberal Arts College and the School of Theology and became the first dean of Boston's Graduate School. He published numerous books and articles, including *The Theory of Thought and Knowledge* (1897) and *Personalism* (1908). Edgar Sheffield Brightman (1884–1953) received his S.T.B. in 1910 and Ph.D. in 1912 from Boston University. Brightman taught at Nebraska Wesleyan University from 1912 to 1915 and at Wesleyan University from 1915 to 1919. In 1919 he returned to Boston University as a professor of philosophy, and remained there until his death. His publications include *Introduction to Philosophy* (1925), *The Problem of God* (1930), *The Finding of God* (1931), *Moral Laws* (1933), *A Philosophy of Religion* (1940), and *Nature and Values* (1945). Brightman is noted for his theistic finitism, and particularly his view that God's power to combat evil is limited. See Brightman's intellectual autobiography, "Religion as Truth," in *Contemporary American Theology*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Round Table, 1932), pp. 53–81; Brightman, *Person and Reality*, ed. Peter A. Bertocci (New York: Ronald Press, 1958); and Walter G. Muelder, "Edgar S. Brightman: Person and Moral Philosopher," in *The Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics, and Theology*, ed. Paul Deats and Carol Robb (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986), pp. 105–20.

20. L. Harold DeWolf (1905–1986) received his A.B. from Nebraska Wesleyan University in 1924, his S.T.B. in 1926, and his Ph.D. in 1935 from Boston University. He served as a Methodist pastor in Nebraska and Massachusetts between 1926 and 1936. He taught in the department of philosophy at Boston University from 1934 until 1944, when he became professor of systematic theology in the School of Theology. He left Boston University in 1965 to become dean and professor of systematic theology at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. He retired in 1972. He also taught in central and east Africa during 1955–1956 and 1962–1963. His publications include *The Religious Revolt Against Reason* (1949), *A Theology of the Living Church* (1953), *The Case for Theology in Liberal Perspective* (1959), *Present Trends in Christian Thought* (1960), *The Enduring Message of the Bible* (1960), *Responsible Freedom: Guidelines to Christian Action* (1971), and *Crime and Justice in America: A Paradox of Conscience* (1975). King remained in contact with DeWolf

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During his first semester at Boston, King clarified his personalist views in papers that explored various forms of personalism and critically assessed the writings of non-personalist theologians. King's essays for his classes with Brightman and DeWolf were not as personally revealing as were some of those he had written at Crozer, but they did provide opportunities for him to express his theological opinions. As was the case during his Crozer years, King's arguments were sufficiently consistent and convincing to persuade his teachers of his competency; yet they were also derivative, often relying on appropriated words and phrases. In his essays King acknowledged drawing from others as he refined his theological beliefs, but, especially in the essays for DeWolf, he often failed to cite his sources precisely and appropriated the words of others without adequate attribution.²¹ The significance of King's academic papers lies not in their cogency or originality, therefore, but in their reliability as expressions of his theological preferences. The Boston essays trace the course of King's theological development, revealing how he constructed a theological identity by carefully selecting insights from various perspectives that were consistent with his own. These borrowed insights would contribute to his subsequent religious leadership.

In first-semester papers written for Brightman and DeWolf, for example, King distinguished his views from the personalism of the British Hegelian J. M. E. McTaggart, who found belief in an omnipotent and creative God "metaphysically unsound." King labeled McTaggart an atheist, asserting that he failed to "recognize the necessity of one all-embracing or controlling Person." Although King identified himself with Brightman's theological perspective, he offered mild criticisms of his professor's notion that the existence of evil implied that God's power was limited, arguing, for example, that this theistic finitism left "faith in a supreme God endangered."²² Nevertheless, his formulation of the problem of theodicy placed him close to Brightman's views. "God's power is finite," King wrote on his final examination for Brightman's class, "but his goodness is infinite. . . . After a somewhat extensive study of the idea I am all but convinced that [this] is the only ad[e]quate explanation for the existence of evil."²³ King's defense of personalism from the chal-

after graduating in 1955. DeWolf facilitated the 1964 donation of King's personal papers to Boston University, traveling to Atlanta to help pack the boxes for shipment. For DeWolf's assessment of his former student, see L. Harold DeWolf, "Martin Luther King, Jr., as Theologian," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 4 (1977): 1-11. For more on DeWolf, see his intellectual autobiography, "Ethical Implications for Criminal Justice," in *The Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics, and Theology*, ed. Paul Deats and Carol Robb (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986), pp. 221-235.

21. For discussions of plagiarism in King's student writings, see the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project, "The Student Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Summary Statement on Research," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (June 1991): 23-31; and Clayborne Carson, Peter Holloran, Ralph E. Luker, and Penny A. Russell, "Martin Luther King, Jr., as Scholar: A Re-examination of His Theological Writings," *ibid.*, pp. 93-105.

22. King, "A Comparison and Evaluation of the Views Set Forth in J. M. E. McTaggart's *Some Dogmas of Religion* with Those Set Forth by Edgar S. Brightman in His Course on 'Philosophy of Religion,'" 25 October 1951, MLKP-MBU: Box 112.

23. King, Final examination answers, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 109 in this volume.

lenges of alternative theological schools gained the approval of Brightman and DeWolf, although the two professors sometimes debated King's points in the margins of his papers.

King received an A — for the course he took with Brightman and grades of A and A — for the two courses with DeWolf, but the latter professor was more effusive in applauding King's work during the first semester. Less critical than Brightman in his evaluations of King's papers, DeWolf gradually assumed the role of King's primary mentor, as he would for many other black students at Boston. DeWolf called one of King's essays "superior," adding that it exhibited "excellent, incisive criticism." He praised another paper on the Swiss neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth as an "excellent study," awarding King an A. In assessing the Barth paper, DeWolf did not note that King largely restated the views of his professors, both at Crozer and at Boston. Challenging Barth's view of God as "Wholly Other," King conceded that he had been "greatly influence by the liberal theology" to which he was exposed at Crozer and proceeded to use the words of Crozer professor George W. Davis when acknowledging that neo-orthodoxy served as a "necessary corrective" for "shallow" liberalism: "[Barth's] cry does call attention to the desperateness of the human situation. He does insist that religion begins with God and that man cannot have faith apart from him. He does proclaim that apart from God our human efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into darkest night."²⁴ King would continue to use Davis's vivid mode of expression on subsequent occasions to praise an author's affirmation of God's transcendence in the world.²⁵

In another essay written for DeWolf entitled "Contemporary Continental Theology," King's tendency to appropriate the insights of others was even more evident: lengthy sections of the essay were taken verbatim from *Contemporary Continental Theology* by Walter Marshall Horton.²⁶ King obscured his reliance on Horton by referring to him only once, when he acknowledged that a passage was quoted from Horton. King cited several European theologians, including Anders Nygren, but his quotations from them and the corresponding interpretations were in fact appropriated from Horton.²⁷ Although the ideas expressed in the essay were consistent with King's later writings on *agape*, his explication of Nygren's *Agape and Eros* was identical to Horton's. Thus, although King's understanding of the distinction between romantic

24. George W. Davis, "Some Theological Continuities in the Crisis Theology," *Crozer Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (July 1950): 217–218, quoted in King, "Karl Barth's Conception of God," p. 106 in this volume. In addition to this concluding statement on Barth's prophetic message, King appropriated many of his criticisms from Davis and another source, Alvin Sylvester Zerbe's *The Karl Barth Theology, or The New Transcendentalism* (Cleveland: Central Publishing House, 1930).

25. In two other Boston essays ("A Comparison and Evaluation of the Theology of Luther with that of Calvin" and "Contemporary Continental Theology," pp. 191 and 138, respectively, in this volume) and in his dissertation, King appropriated the passage to praise such diverse theologians as John Calvin, Martin Luther, Paul Tillich, and Henry Nelson Wieman.

26. Walter Marshall Horton, *Contemporary Continental Theology: An Interpretation for Anglo-Saxons* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938).

27. A more extended discussion of King's plagiarism of Horton is in "Student Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.," pp. 24–25.

Introduction love and the Greek concept of *agape* may have been shaped by Nygren's ideas, the evidence in "Contemporary Continental Theology" suggests that King's ideas were drawn from Horton's analysis rather than from his own reading of Nygren.

DeWolf had little reason to suspect plagiarism given his student's good performance in written examinations and in the classroom. He later remembered King as "a very good student, all business, a scholar's scholar, one digging deeply to work out and think through his philosophy of religion and life."²⁸ DeWolf's obliviousness regarding King's plagiaries is partially explained by the consistency of the theological perspective that emerged in the papers, but it also suggests that he did not demand of King the analytical precision and originality that might have prepared his student for a career of scholarly writing. DeWolf's failure to note the plagiarized passages in King's essays suggests that he asked little more of King than accurate explication and judicious synthesis. Brightman was more demanding. He insisted, for example, on careful citation practices, as outlined in an essay on writing bibliographies in his *Manual for Students of Philosophy*. He told King to consult the manual after the bibliography to King's first essay failed to meet his exacting standards. In his next paper, King indicated an awareness of his professor's expectations by appending a note to the essay, apologizing for footnotes that were "in somewhat bad condition" and a block quotation that had not been properly arranged, both errors attributed to a poor typist.²⁹

During his second semester at Boston, King continued his exploration of personalist theology in courses with DeWolf and broadened his studies with a course at Harvard University in the history of modern philosophy with Raphael Demos.³⁰ King expanded his criticisms of theological liberalism in an outline written for DeWolf on Reinhold Niebuhr, whose writings led King to acknowledge "the fundamental weaknesses and inevitable sterility of the humanistic emphasis" of liberalism in the twentieth century.³¹ King was particularly receptive to Niebuhr's criticism of love and justice as conceived in liberal and orthodox theology. In orthodoxy, "individual perfection is too often made an end in itself," but liberalism "vainly seeks to overcome justice th[r]ough purely moral and rational suasions." Liberalism, King wrote, "confuses the ideal itself with the realistic means which must be employed to coerce society into an approximation of that ideal." King was also drawn to Niebuhr's eco-

28. L. Harold DeWolf, interview with John H. Britton, 23 April 1968, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

29. King, "A Comparison and Evaluation of McTaggart and Brightman"; and King to Brightman, 6 December 1951, appended to "A Comparison and Evaluation of the Philosophical Views Set Forth in J. M. E. McTaggart's *Some Dogmas of Religion*, and William E. Hocking's *The Meaning of God in Human Experience* with Those Set Forth in Edgar S. Brightman's Course on 'Philosophy of Religion,'" p. 76 in this volume.

30. King passed over courses with such titles as Seminar in Gandhi, Social Christianity, Methods of Changing Social Attitudes, and Christianity and Race Relations. See Boston University catalogs, 1951-1953.

8 31. King, "Reinhold Niebuhr," p. 141 in this volume.

conomic and moral critique of capitalism, which King saw as responsible for “appalling injustices,” particularly the “concentration of power and resources in the hands of a relatively small wealthy class.”³²

In his conclusion King applauded Niebuhr’s emphasis on making realistic moral choices and found “very little to disagree with” in Niebuhr’s social analysis. King did, however, criticize Niebuhr for an inadequate explanation of how *agape* operates in human history: “He fails to see that the availability of the divine *Agape* is an essential affirmati[on] of the Christian religion.”³³ King would later emphasize the redemptive power of *agape* in his dissertation and in his public statements as a civil rights leader.³⁴



At Boston University King encountered an urban environment quite different from the sheltered seminary atmosphere he had left at Crozer, but he quickly adjusted, establishing contacts with other black students attending Boston’s many colleges and seminaries. He actively sought out southern students, particularly those from Atlanta, and served as their link to the South. “Martin was in the center of it all,” one friend later commented, “as we discussed topics of interest.”³⁵ Traveling south for the holidays and other occasions, King would bring back news about Morehouse College and other Atlanta-area schools.³⁶

King’s easy warmth and charm made him an attractive figure on campus. One friend described him as a “very amiable” person who liked parties and was generous with his money: “He was like a prince,” one friend recalled. A skilled mimic and comic, King developed a private language with the other students. Biting into a hot dog at his favorite restaurant, King would say, “Doctor, this is a great institution.” The expression became his signature, and he would apply it in many situations.³⁷ His acquaintances were eager to hear King speak at Boston-area churches. “We always found our way to those churches,” one friend recalled, “as much to hear his message, but also his style was so entertaining.”³⁸ Gathering together in the school cafeteria or in

32. King, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Ethical Dualism,” pp. 146, 142 in this volume.

33. King, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Ethical Dualism,” p. 150 in this volume. DeWolf gave the essay an A –, calling it an “excellent interpretation and exposition,” but wished that “the critical evaluation had been carried further.”

34. See, for instance, King, “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman,” p. 441 in this volume; and King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 104–106. King’s discussion of *agape* in *Stride* may also derive from Harry Emerson Fosdick, *On Being Fit to Live With: Sermons on Post-War Christianity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), pp. 6–7; and George Kelsey, “The Christian Way in Race Relations,” in *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, ed. William Stuart Nelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 40.

35. Willard A. Williams, “Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr.,” 1986, WAWP-GAMK. See also “Conversation Between Cornish Rogers and David Thelen,” *Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (June 1991): 44–46.

36. “Conversation Between Cornish Rogers and David Thelen,” p. 45.

37. Williams, “Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr.”

38. Sybil Haydel Morial, interview with Clayborne Carson, 25 June 1992.

Introduction dormitory rooms, King and the other students explored issues not covered in the classroom. A friend who left Boston after King's first year nostalgically called the group "the gang in the room solving the problems of the world, politically, socially, and in the theological realm."³⁹ Although participants sometimes discussed racial discrimination, issues such as the positive role of the church in the black community generally engaged them more than discussions of civil rights and black-white relations. Unlike Benjamin Mays and other black academics who had focused on racial issues in their academic studies, King and most others in his group sought advanced training in areas not directly related to their heritage as African Americans.

Over time these gatherings were formalized as meetings of the Dialectical Society. Perhaps modeled after a Philosophical Society initiated by Brightman thirty years before, the group comprised a dozen theological students who met monthly, usually at King's apartment, to discuss a paper presented by one of the participants. "It was a group," one member recalled, "that was mainly interested in certain philosophical and theological ideas and applied them to the black situation in the country."⁴⁰ King generally presided over the sessions, helping choose the topics for discussion or engaging a guest speaker such as his advisor, Professor DeWolf. One participant later reflected that King's leadership "was not aggressive, but always available." King "would speak in the discussions, but I never got the impression that he was insisting that if he said it, it had to be right"; instead, King encouraged the others to see that "we're here to cooperate and not compete."⁴¹ King drew upon his academic study of the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr in one of his own talks to the Dialectical Society. Though King's presentation did not directly refer to racial issues, he questioned Niebuhr's notion of the inherent imperfectibility of human nature. "The result of this view is that there can be no real moral progress in man's social, political, and religious life," King complained. "Within such a view is there no hope for man?"⁴²

During his first year at Boston University, King strengthened his reputation as a skilled preacher. In September 1951, while driving to Boston for the first time, King preached at Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, one of the largest congregations in the country. Its pastor was the Reverend Gardner Taylor, a gifted preacher in the National Baptist Convention and an associate of King, Sr. In addition to Taylor, King was familiar from an early age with other prominent black ministers, many of whom knew his father well and had preached at Ebenezer. King's admiration for the talented preachers who passed through Ebenezer was evident; during one discussion at Boston University, King proudly listed some of the most powerful orators of the African-American Baptist church—Gardner Taylor, Sandy Ray, Mordecai Johnson,

39. W. T. Handy, Jr., to King, 18 November 1952, p. 161 in this volume.

40. "Conversation Between Cornish Rogers and David Thelen," p. 46.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

42. King, "The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr," p. 275 in this volume.

and Benjamin Mays—and challenged the Methodists to do the same. The Methodist seminarians could produce only one name.⁴³ King's student acquaintances often accompanied him when he delivered guest sermons and recognized his special oratorical talent. A classmate commented that she and other students thought he was a "phenomenal preacher" who could "mesmerize" the audience.⁴⁴ His developing reputation as a rising young star of the Baptist church opened up guest pulpits along the eastern seaboard. Churches in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York offered welcome havens for King as he traveled back and forth between Atlanta and Boston.

An old friend of King, Sr., the Reverend William H. Hester, was particularly supportive of King and other black graduate students, welcoming them to the pulpit of Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury. King preached at the church occasionally and participated regularly in the young adults group on Sunday evenings. King once gave a sermon on black women as a "great institution," a female friend remembered, in which he "talked about how resourceful we were and how persevering we were, and how caring and strong."⁴⁵ Later, during the Montgomery bus boycott, a parishioner wrote to King recalling "the great sermon" he had heard at Twelfth. In the sermon, probably entitled "Loving Your Enemies," King had preached from a passage in the book of Matthew: "But I say unto you, 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."⁴⁶ If we can judge from their titles, several of King's sermons from this period would later become standards in his repertoire. There is little documentation of these early homilies, but the fragmentary extant evidence suggests that King apparently did not alter a sermon drastically after he initially composed it.⁴⁷ In a later version of "Loving Your Enemies," King stressed the importance of forgiveness, noting that "there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us." King indicated that this love was not "some sentimental outpouring," but *agape*, or "redemptive good will for all men." Love could transform "an enemy into a friend," because "only by loving them can we know God and experience the beauty of his holiness."⁴⁸

King maintained his close ties to Ebenezer Baptist Church and his family

43. Williams, "Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr."

44. Sybil Haydel Morial, interview with Clayborne Carson. See also Williams, "Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr."

45. Sybil Haydel Morial, interview with Clayborne Carson.

46. Milton Britton to King, 5 February 1956, MLKP-MBU: Box 15; Matthew 6:44.

47. See, for example, the transcript of King's "Rediscovering Lost Values," 28 February 1954, and the discussion of it in this introduction, pp. 248–256 and 26–28, respectively, in this volume. During the Montgomery bus boycott King gave this sermon several times, occasionally with the title "Going Forward by Going Backwards." Complete transcripts have not been found, but contemporary reports indicate that the structure and language of these versions were similar to the one King preached in 1954.

48. King, *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 48, 49, 50, 52, 53.

Introduction while at school in Boston, speaking with his mother by telephone, "often for hours at a time, three or four times a week."⁴⁹ In late November 1951, he drove to Atlanta to celebrate his parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, making the first of four trips home that school year. The next month, he traveled to Atlanta again to participate in the Christmas and New Year's services at Ebenezer. His discussions with his parents often concerned his future plans regarding marriage. They expected him to find a wife quickly, as social mores required that preachers be married, but King made slow progress toward that goal. "When I knew M. L.," W. T. Handy later remembered, "he wasn't running after the girls; the girls were running after him. And he was a good catch."⁵⁰ After hearing about King's popularity from Handy, who had visited the King family in Atlanta, Alberta Williams King expressed concern about her son's marriage prospects in a sober letter to Martin, Jr., which he shared with Handy. Handy later quoted King's mother in a teasing letter to him: "Remember M. L., 'we are expecting great things from you'"—adding that only King himself would "restrain our expectations from bearing fruit."⁵¹

Six months after arriving in Boston, King asked Mary Powell, a friend from Atlanta, if she knew any young women who might suit him. Powell immediately thought of Coretta Scott, a fellow student at the New England Conservatory of Music. More interested in a musical career than in marrying a Baptist minister, Coretta Scott, as Powell described her, was a poised, attractive, intelligent young woman with a mind of her own. As Scott later recalled, King called her to see if they could meet. When she agreed and met with King the next day, she remembered feeling initially unimpressed with King's height—five feet seven inches. But when King began talking, he "grew in stature." As she recalled, "This young man became increasingly better-looking as he talked, so strongly and convincingly. . . . He seemed to know exactly where he was going and how he was going to get there." At the end of their first date she remembered King telling her, "You have everything I have ever wanted in a wife. There are only four things, and you have them all . . . character, intelligence, personality, and beauty."⁵² King and Scott began dating, and their courtship progressed rapidly; within several months Scott began to consider seriously King's talk of marriage.⁵³

Compared to King's relatively privileged childhood in Atlanta's "Sweet Auburn," Coretta Scott's youth had been less advantaged. She grew up on a farm in rural Alabama twenty miles outside the county seat of Marion. Her father,

49. King, Sr., *Daddy King*, p. 148.

50. W. T. Handy, Jr., interview with Clayborne Carson, 1 July 1992.

51. W. T. Handy, Jr., to King, 18 November 1952, p. 163 in this volume. Alberta Williams King's letter to her son is not extant.

52. Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), pp. 54–55.

53. King, *My Life*, pp. 20–64. See also L. D. Reddick, *Crusader Without Violence* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), pp. 90–105.

Obadiah Scott, was a hardworking farmer who ran a barbershop in his home at night to earn extra money. His industriousness brought the family material comfort and stability, but it also caused Coretta Scott to worry about her father's safety. In a time when successful blacks often encountered racist violence, she later marveled, "It is a wonder that my own father did not end up in the swamp."⁵⁴ Her fears for her father were not unfounded. In November 1942, the Scott home had burned to the ground, and the following spring another fire destroyed their newly purchased sawmill after Scott refused to sell it to a white logger.⁵⁵

Determined to advance her education, Coretta Scott decided to attend Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where her older sister, Edythe, had been a student. Scott enrolled in 1945 "with a good deal of doubt" and "with a good deal of fear" about northern culture. Her decision to go north to college stemmed from her conviction that "a good education . . . should be as free as possible—and that means free from Jim Crow as well as free in classroom teaching."⁵⁶ Taking voice lessons and pursuing a program of music education, Scott became aware of northern racial discrimination when she attempted to fulfill her student teaching requirement in a local elementary school: the school board prohibited her from joining the all-white faculty even though the student body was integrated. When administrators at Antioch discouraged her from protesting this injustice, Scott complained, "I came here from Alabama to be free of segregation." The incident motivated her to join the Antioch chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other civil rights organizations. In addition to civil rights activism, she was also drawn toward the pacifist movement. As a member of the Young Progressives, Scott supported Henry Wallace's presidential campaign in 1948 and attended the Progressive party convention as a student delegate.⁵⁷ A few years later, when she first met King in Boston, Scott saw herself as more of a political activist than he was; nevertheless, the two students shared a strong commitment to social reform.

As the courtship continued during the spring, King and Scott found many areas of agreement in their dissenting political and economic views. According to a later memoir, King had undertaken a serious examination of Karl Marx's writings during the Christmas holidays of 1949. Although he rejected Marxian materialism, ethical relativism, and totalitarianism, King was attracted to Marx's critique of capitalism. "I was deeply concerned from my early teen days about the gulf between superfluous wealth and abject poverty, and my reading of Marx made me ever more conscious of this gulf," he

54. King, *My Life*, p. 25.

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

56. Coretta Scott, "Why I Came To College," *Opportunity* 26 (1948): 42, 71.

57. Coretta Scott King, interview with Donna Ruth Duvigneaud, in Duvigneaud, "The Spirit and Vision of Coretta Scott King: A Case Study of Her Contributions to Nonviolent Social Change" (M.A. thesis, New York University, 1984); King, *My Life*, p. 43.

Introduction explained in *Stride Toward Freedom*.⁵⁸ Scott recalled that King told her he “could never be a Communist,” nor “a thoroughgoing capitalist” like his father. “A society based on making all the money you can and ignoring people’s needs is wrong. I don’t want to *own* a lot of things,” she remembered him saying.⁵⁹ King, Sr., recalled political arguments—“sharp exchanges”—with his son, who “seemed to be drifting away from the basics of capitalism and Western democracy.”⁶⁰ Such disagreements may have been stimulated by King, Jr.’s August 1952 lecture at Ebenezer on “The Challenge of Communism to Christianity.”⁶¹

That same August, King arranged for Coretta Scott to visit Atlanta in an effort to win his parents’ approval of their relationship. Scott recalled being wary during this first encounter with the King family—“all I could think of was the well-known, rather closed social life of the black middle class of Atlanta.” She discovered that the Kings “were dedicated people who judged others on their own merits,” but concluded that her visit “was not an unqualified success.” King, Sr., remained unsure about the couple’s seriousness. King was not able to meet Scott’s family that summer, and they returned to Boston in September without either family’s approval of their plans to marry.⁶²



Back at school for his second year, King was troubled by the unresolved tensions with his father over his courtship of Coretta Scott, and he spoke of his frustration in conversations with friends. That fall former Crozer classmate H. Edward Whitaker teased him about his unfulfilled intentions: “By the way you told me two years ago you would be married by the next summer. Apparently you are still meeting these girls who are one-time wreckers.” W. T. Handy also expressed an interest in the personal life of “the most eligible and popular bachelor in town”: “I know you are now married? Which one was

58. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 94. King wrote: “In so far as Marx posited a metaphysical materialism, an ethical relativism, and a strangulating totalitarianism, I responded with an unambiguous ‘no’; but in so far as he pointed to weaknesses of traditional capitalism, contributed to the growth of a definite self-consciousness in the masses, and challenged the social conscience of the Christian churches, I responded with a definite ‘yes’” (p. 95).

59. King, *My Life*, p. 56.

60. King, Sr., *Daddy King*, p. 147.

61. Melvin H. Watson, dean of the Morehouse School of Religion, commented that King did not adequately clarify the difference between the materialism of the Greek philosophical atomists and that of Karl Marx. Watson corrected King’s understanding of Karl Marx, who argued, as Watson explained, that “the culture, thoughts, in fact the whole life of man is conditioned . . . by his relationship to the instruments necessary to the making of a living.” Watson also pointed out that “Stalin would certainly not make the question of *race* a sub-point as you did on Sunday,” maintaining that Soviet Communism had taken a much stronger official position against racism. Watson reminded King that his comments “by no means indicate a lack of appreciation for the fine job you did on Sunday.” See Melvin Watson to King, 14 August 1952, pp. 156–157 in this volume. Watson had written an article on a similar topic in the *Journal of Religious Thought*. In 1963 King published a sermon with a similar title (“How Should a Christian View Communism”) in *Strength to Love*, pp. 97–106.

14 62. King, *My Life*, pp. 63–67.

it?”⁶³ In addition to these concerns, King was experiencing difficulties with his course work after registering for a heavy academic load: two lecture courses with DeWolf, a seminar on the history of philosophy with Peter Bertocci, and a yearlong course on the philosophy of Hegel with his advisor, Brightman. He also took a class at Harvard with Raphael Demos on the philosophy of Plato.

The first sign of a troubled term came when King stumbled through an exploratory quiz for the Hegel seminar, missing such basic definitions as “logos” and “naturalism.”⁶⁴ King had studied Hegel in other courses at Boston University, including Richard Millard’s *History of Recent Philosophy*, but the seminar with Brightman constituted King’s first prolonged exposure to Hegel’s thought. A less than thorough knowledge of German heightened King’s difficulty with the course, and—perhaps an indication of his frustration with the philosopher’s abstruse language—his essays for the seminar were appropriated largely from a synopsis of Hegel’s philosophy.⁶⁵ The loss of his mentor’s guidance added to King’s difficulties. Two weeks after the beginning of the semester a cerebral hemorrhage disabled Brightman, who was replaced by Peter Bertocci as leader of the seminar. Following Brightman’s death several months later, King chose DeWolf as his advisor.

Not long after the beginning of the term King encountered difficulties in his other classes as well. After receiving an A on his first midterm examination for DeWolf’s course on the history of Christian doctrine, DeWolf chastened King for his weak performance on the second: “Alas! You were to ‘illustrate concretely some influences.’ You have mostly paraphrased lecture material on the non-Christian philosophies themselves and in telling of their influences—abstractly, not concretely—have added some highly doubtful views.” King’s poor grade on the examination (68/100) prompted his concerned professor to ask: “Do you have a heavier program than you can swing this term? Let’s face it together quickly. Something seems wrong. Can I be of any help?”⁶⁶ Two weeks later King took two midterm examinations on the same day, one at Harvard on the philosophy of Plato and another at Boston for a seminar in the history of philosophy. He received C’s on both, though Bertocci tried to

63. H. Edward Whitaker to King, 31 October 1952; and W. T. Handy, Jr., to King, 18 November 1952; pp. 159, 163, respectively, in this volume.

64. King, Exploratory quiz, Seminar in Hegel, 24 September 1952, MLKP-MBU: Box 113.

65. King failed a German language examination early in the semester. King’s main source was W. T. Stace’s *The Philosophy of Hegel: A Systematic Exposition* (London: Macmillan, 1924). King’s writings for the seminar included “The Development of Hegel’s Thought as Revealed in His Early Theological Writings,” 1 October 1952; “The Transition from Sense-Certainty to Sense-Perception in Hegel’s Analysis of Consciousness,” 15 October 1952; “The Transition from Sense-Perception to Understanding,” 29 October 1952; “Objective Spirit,” 4 February–22 May 1953; and “An Exposition of the First Triad of Categories of the Hegelian Logic—Being, Non-Being, Becoming,” 4 February–22 May 1953; all in MLKP-MBU: Box 115. The last essay cited is published in this volume, pp. 196–201.

66. King, Examination answers, Religious Teachings of the Old Testament, 3 October 1952; and Examination answers, History of Christian Doctrine, 28 October 1952; both in MLKP-MBU: Box 115.

Introduction be sympathetic: "Too much of this is good to make me want to discourage you, but it does need more careful attention to detail & connection."⁶⁷

Shortly after these examinations, King confronted his father during his parents' visit to Boston in late November. Scott stopped by King's apartment every day during the visit, and King took his mother aside to tell her about his marriage plans.⁶⁸ Alberta Williams King had worried about her son earlier in the semester. She "was the first to notice that M. L. had stopped calling home as much as he had when he'd first gone up to Boston to study." Upon arriving in Boston and seeing the young couple's devotion to each other—"the young man was so much in love, stars were just glittering in his eyes"—King, Sr., decided to challenge them. "Let me ask you very directly," he later remembered saying to Scott. "Do you take my son seriously, Coretta?" Thinking that King, Sr., was referring to his son's sense of humor, Scott answered, "Why, no, Reverend King, not really." King, Sr., exploded in reply to the cheerful answer, mentioning the other women his son had dated: King "has gone out with the daughters of some fine, solid Atlanta families, folks we've known for many years, people we respect, and whose feelings we'd never trample on. I'm talking, Coretta, about people who have much to share and much to offer." When King, Sr., talked with his son in private after confronting Scott, the younger King insisted that he was going to marry her. "She's the most important person to come into my life, Dad," King, Sr., remembered his son saying; "I know you don't really approve, but this is what I have to do."⁶⁹ King, Sr., left Boston without giving his assent, but he eventually relented. Within a few months, King, Jr., and Scott were making plans for their wedding, and in April 1953 King, Sr., announced the engagement from Ebenezer's pulpit.⁷⁰

Shortly after the confrontation with his father, King began to recover from his weak midterm grades. He wrote a strong examination on the religious teachings of the Old Testament, prompting DeWolf to comment, "Back in stride! Good work." In fact, DeWolf was so convinced of King's recovery that, despite low grades on the earlier examinations, he gave King an A and an A—for the two classes.⁷¹ DeWolf's course on the religious teachings of the Old Testament was particularly interesting to King, offering the young minister an opportunity to enrich his preaching through detailed analysis of the Bible. King's notes from the course reveal his evolving thoughts about the nature of divinity. He wrote more than a thousand notecards of informal biblical exegesis on many books in the Old Testament, including one famous passage

67. King, Examination answers, Seminar in History of Philosophy, 13 November 1952; and Examination answers, Philosophy of Plato, 13 November 1952; both in MLKP-MBU: Box 113.

68. King, *My Life*, p. 68.

69. King, Sr., *Daddy King*, pp. 149–151.

70. *Atlanta Daily World*, 5 April 1953.

71. See King, Examination answers, Religious Teachings of the Old Testament, 22 September 1952–28 January 1953, MLKP-MBU: Box 115; and King, Final examination answers, History of Christian Doctrine, 20 January 1953, MLKP-MBU: Box 113.

from Amos (“let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream”) that King later included in many of his most famous orations. In his notes King argued that the God of Amos was “a God that demands justice rather than sacrifice; righteousness rather than ritual.”⁷² In his final examination for the course King declared a strong affinity for the Old Testament prophets, noting that they provided the “most illuminating conceptions of God,” namely, an ethical monotheism: “For Amos God is a God of righteousness who demands ethical actions from his children. . . . For Hosea God is a God of love, and even his justice is but an expression of his love.”⁷³

In his notecards King emphasized that Christians should actively struggle for social justice. He praised Amos’s condemnation of religious worshipers who neglected the importance of living ethically. “The external forms of worship mean nothing,” King maintained, “unless a man’s heart is right.” King’s belief that modern culture placed too much faith in human nature attracted him to Jeremiah, a prophet who stressed faith in God. Noting the similarity on this issue between Jeremiah and neo-orthodox theologians, King declared that “one of the great services of neo-orthodoxy, notwithstanding its e[xt]remes, is its revolt against all forms of humanistic perfectionism.” At the same time, in a reading of another passage in Jeremiah, King insisted that human nature contains the potential for ethical action: “No matter how low an individual sinks in sin, there is still a spark of good within him.” King’s reading of Jeremiah, Amos, and other books affirmed his long-standing conviction that “whenever Christianity has remained true to its prophetic mission, it has taken a deep interest in social justice.” Echoing an explanation he had made in an Ebenezer sermon regarding communism’s appeal, King said that “the success of communism in the world today is due to the failure of Christians to live to the highest ethical ten[et]s inherent in its system.”⁷⁴ King’s abiding faith in the power of Christianity to create a just society led him to conclude, in an essay for DeWolf on St. Augustine, that the ultimate solution to the problem of evil was “not intellectual but spiritual.” King argued that “the Christian answer to the problem of evil is ultimately contained in what he does with it, itself the result of what Christ did with evil on the cross.”⁷⁵

Completing his formal course work, King took fewer classes during the second term, but continued to struggle. Entering his final semester of courses on Christian doctrine and on the philosophy of Hegel, King also enrolled in a directed study in dissertation writing and a Harvard course with Nathaniel Lawrence on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. His essays during the term were undistinguished. However, the Whitehead course did prompt

72. King, Notecards on books of the Old Testament, p. 165 in this volume.

73. King, Final examination answers, Religious Teachings of the Old Testament, p. 169 in this volume.

74. King, Notecards on books of the Old Testament, p. 165–167 in this volume.

75. King, “A Critical Evaluation of Augustine’s Conception of Evil,” 9 January 1953, MLKP-MBU: Box 115. His main source was Marion Burton, *The Problem of Evil* (Chicago: Open Court, 1909).

Courses at Boston University

Year & Course, grouped by semester	Instructor	Grade	Credit Hours
1951–1952			
Directed Study in Systematic Theology	L. Harold DeWolf	A –	4
Personalism	L. Harold DeWolf	A	3
Philosophy of Religion	Edgar S. Brightman	A –	2
Formal Logic (without graduate credit)	David S. Scarrow	C	(3)
Religious Teachings of the New Testament	L. Harold DeWolf	B	3
Seminar in Systematic Theology	L. Harold DeWolf	A	3
Directed Study in Systematic Theology	L. Harold DeWolf	A –	3
History of Modern Philosophy ¹	Raphael Demos		3
1952 Intersession			
History of Recent Philosophy	Richard M. Millard	A –	3
Seminar in Historical Theology	Edward P. Booth	B +	3
1952–1953			
Religious Teachings of the Old Testament	L. Harold DeWolf	A –	3
Seminar in History of Philosophy	Peter A. Bertocci	B +	3
Seminar in Philosophy	Edgar S. Brightman	B +	2
History of Christian Doctrine I	L. Harold DeWolf	A	2
Philosophy of Plato ²	Raphael Demos	B	3
Directed Study in Thesis and Dissertation Writing	Jannette E. Newhall	A	3
Seminar in Philosophy	Peter A. Bertocci	B	2
History of Christian Doctrine II	L. Harold DeWolf	A	2
Philosophy of Whitehead ³	Nathaniel Lawrence	A –	3

¹Course taken at Harvard University.²Course taken at Harvard University.³Course taken at Harvard University.

him to write hundreds of notecards on Whitehead's philosophy in preparation for a lengthy term paper on the philosophical paradox of "the one and the many"—that is, the question of whether reality is composed of a unified whole or of numerous parts. King's essay, an expository exercise that explored few of the theological implications of Whitehead's views, received faint praise from Lawrence: "The worst that can be said of this essay is that it is not scintillating. You really wrestle with nothing."⁷⁶

In King's most revealing paper of this term, he evaluated the theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin in an essay for DeWolf's course on Christian doctrine. According to King, Calvin's emphasis on God's power and justice was notable, but the Protestant reformer neglected the importance of God's love. "God is first and foremost an all loving Father," King affirmed, "and any theology which fails to recognize this, in an attempt to maintain the sovereignty of God, is betraying everything that is best in the Christian tradition." King also found Luther's and Calvin's doctrine of original sin undermined by modern discoveries about evolution. Noting that "it has become increasingly difficult to imagine any such original state of perfection for man," King felt "compelled, therefore, to reject the idea of a catastrophic fall." He espoused a notion of human nature that owed more to the evangelical liberalism of Davis and DeWolf than to the neo-orthodoxy of Barth and Niebuhr. Man's fall from grace, he argued, "is not due to some falling away from an original righteousness, but to a failure to rise to a higher level of his present existence."⁷⁷

Shortly after completing his courses at Harvard and Boston University, King traveled to rural Perry County, Alabama, for his marriage to Coretta Scott on 18 June 1953. King's father performed the ceremony in the yard of the Scott family home. After the reception, the Kings drove to nearby Marion for their wedding night, which they spent in a black funeral home because the white-owned hotels in town would not allow the young couple to register. Forgoing a honeymoon, they attended a large reception in their honor at Ebenezer the next evening and settled into the King family home near the church for the remainder of the summer. On the following Sunday, Coretta Scott King, who had been raised a Methodist, joined Ebenezer and was baptized by her father-in-law. King, Jr.'s parents then departed for a summer vacation, leaving him as pastor in charge of the church. Coretta Scott King was quickly welcomed into the community, serving as Ebenezer's "First Lady of the Summer" and working as a clerk at Citizens' Trust Company, a black-owned bank of which King, Sr., was a director.⁷⁸

As a result of Ebenezer's prominence in the community, WERD, an Atlanta

76. King, "Whitehead and the Problem of the One and the Many," 26 January–2 June 1953, MLKP-MBU: Box 112.

77. King, "A Comparison and Evaluation of the Theology of Luther with That of Calvin," pp. 188, 190 in this volume.

78. For additional details about the wedding and the summer of 1953, see King, *My Life*, pp. 71–75.

Introduction radio station—the first owned and operated by African Americans—began broadcasting King’s sermons that summer. Although these homilies have not been located, transcripts of similarly titled sermons delivered later suggest that King urged the Ebenezer congregation to continue its struggle against injustice and inequality. In a later version of “Transformed Nonconformists,” for example, based on a text from Paul’s letter to the Romans, King singled out the organized church for yielding “more to the authority of the world than to the authority of God.” King argued that “the hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists, who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brotherhood.”⁷⁹ King affirmed a similar trust in the transforming power of Christianity in “The Dimensions of a Complete Life.” Belief in a “Supreme, Infinite Person,” or God, he asserted, stood at the core of a “complete life,” but “the rushing tide of materialism” in the modern world had caused Christians to neglect faith.⁸⁰ In these and other sermons, King derided the church’s traditional separation of spiritual and political concerns, arguing that Christianity contained both the potential and the obligation to strive for a more just world.

In September, a few days after delivering “The Dimensions of a Complete Life” at Ebenezer, King traveled to Miami to attend the annual meeting of the National Baptist Convention with fifteen thousand other Baptists. The convention represented the nation’s largest African-American denomination and had been a focus of the King family’s religious activities since its inception. King’s grandfather, the Reverend A. D. Williams, had attended its founding in 1895 and became a prominent leader in Georgia’s affiliated state convention. In their work in the convention, both Williams and King, Sr., stressed the need for a politically active ministry. In 1942, King, Sr., spearheaded an effort in the convention to press President Franklin D. Roosevelt to eliminate racial discrimination on trains.⁸¹ Although the convention supported some of King, Sr.’s efforts to expand the role of ministers to meet the African-American community’s changing needs, by the 1950s it had come to be dominated by more conservative ministers who abjured involvement in political issues.

Activist ministers saw an opportunity in Miami to reform the organization

79. King, *Strength to Love*, pp. 17, 21, 23.

80. Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Measure of a Man* (Philadelphia: Christian Education Press, 1959), pp. 56, 37, 50.

81. Introduction to the *Papers*, 1:9, 13–14, 17, 33–34. After the *Brown* decision on 17 May 1954, King, Sr., stepped up his challenges to segregation. In June of that year he gave a rousing address to ten thousand Baptists gathered in Birmingham for the National Sunday School and Baptist Training Union Congress. Directing his ire at the city’s mayor and superintendent of schools in the audience, King, Sr., declared that “we have learned the way to the Supreme Court and we will call upon it again and again for those rights guaranteed by the Constitution. It took the highest court eighty-nine years to interpret a law that was already on the statute books; now, how long will it take for the law to be enforced?” (“We Want to Live, Says Ga. Pastor,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 July 1954).

when president D. V. Jemison announced that he would retire rather than follow the pattern of previous presidents who often retained office until death. Seventy-one-year-old E. W. Perry, who had served as vice-president for many years, was the immediate favorite in the race to succeed Jemison, but other younger and more dynamic ministers announced their candidacy for the position, including King family friends Sandy Ray of Brooklyn and J. Raymond Henderson of Los Angeles. Some activist ministers supported Perry: Gardner Taylor served as his campaign manager, and Atlanta minister William Holmes Borders was on Perry's slate as vice president at large. But King, Sr., who chose not to attend the gathering, almost certainly supported Jackson.⁸²

King, Jr., and his uncle, the Rev. Joel King, were among those gathered in Miami to witness the contentious presidential campaign. Henderson ultimately withdrew in favor of Perry, but the latter's support declined after T. J. Jemison, the president's son and leader of a recent Baton Rouge boycott against segregated buses, surprised the delegates by seconding Jackson's nomination instead of supporting Perry, his father's contemporary. After a dramatic all-night roll call vote, the Jackson forces prevailed over Perry's, leading to celebrations among the exhausted Baptists: "A Rev. Mr. King [probably Joel King] came up with a broom from somewhere and went through the crowd wildly sweeping the air to demonstrate that the progressives had made a clean sweep."⁸³ Although the extant documents do not indicate King, Jr.'s role in the presidential election, the younger King was probably pleased with the convention, which ended with numerous associates holding major positions in the organization. Although the new president did not follow Benjamin Mays's suggestion to name King, Jr., as one of the delegates to the quadrennial World Council of Churches, he selected King, Sr., to serve on the Convention's Board of Directors. J. Pius Barbour retained his post as editor of the *National Baptist Voice*.⁸⁴ Twenty-four years old and still a student, King, Jr.,

82. A letter to King, Sr., from J. Timothy Boddie, who supported Jackson, suggests that King supported Jackson. Boddie expressed his disappointment that King, Sr., did not attend the convention, but added that "things worked out as we wanted them anyhow" (J. Timothy Boddie to Martin Luther King, Sr., 3 November 1953, p. 210 in this volume). See also "State Leaders Endorse Rev. Jackson for President of Baptist, Inc.," 26 August 1953, Barnett Papers, part 1, reel 52.

83. *Baltimore Afro-American*, 19 September 1953. See also proceedings of the 10 September session in *Record of the Seventy-third Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated . . .*, Miami, Florida, September 9–13, 1953 (n. d.), pp. 60–61.

84. *Record of the Seventy-third Annual Session*, pp. 66, 67. In the months before the Miami meeting, Mays, head of the National Baptist Convention's delegation to the World Council of Churches, recommended to President Jemison that King be named as one of the nine members. Jackson later removed the youthful King and several others from his list and appointed replacements with less academic training than those of Mays's list. See D. V. Jemison to Benjamin E. Mays, 18 July 1953; Mays to Jemison, 25 July; Jemison to Mays, 27 July; Jemison to Mays, 4 August; J. H. Jackson to Mays, 16 September; Mays to Jackson, 19 September; Mays to Robert S. Bilheimer, 25 September; Bilheimer to Mays, 3 December; and Mays to Bilheimer, 11 December 1953; all in BEMP-DHU. See also Gerald F. Gilmore's report "Negro Baptist Politics and the World Council of Churches," ca. 1954, in Barnett Papers, part 3, series J, reel 1.

Introduction already enjoyed family and personal ties to the ministers who would be prominent in national Baptist affairs for many years to come.⁸⁵



After the convention the newlyweds returned to Boston and moved into an apartment at 396 Northampton Street for their last year in that city. They led a hectic life, continuing their academic studies in addition to entertaining friends and hosting occasional meetings of the Dialectical Society. Coretta Scott King enrolled in thirteen courses that year, practicing four instruments and teaching in local schools in order to graduate from the conservatory in June. King, who had completed his formal course work, cheerfully offered to do the cleaning and washing. Coretta Scott King recalled being “very appreciative” of his help, “but I would wish to myself that he had let me do the job.”⁸⁶ In addition to preaching, King was studying for several written qualifying examinations before continuing work on his dissertation.

By the time he finished his course work, King had come to affirm some of the enduring values of his religious heritage. In one qualifying examination he declared that, despite modern society’s moral relativism, God’s judgment was final and eternal: “God has planted in the fiber of the universe certain eternal laws which forever confront every man. They are absolute and not relative. There is an eternal and absolute distinction between right and wrong.” One indispensable answer to the theodicy question, King argued, was contained in the concept of the suffering servant, one of the “most noble” teachings of the Old Testament. “His suffering is not due to something that he has done, but it is vicarious and redemptive. Through his suffering knowledge of God is sp[r]ead to the unbelieving Gentiles and those unbelievers seeing that this suffering servant is innocent will become conscious of their sins and repent and thereby be redeemed. The nation would be healed by his wo[unds].” King saw the death of Jesus Christ on the cross as the fulfillment of the prophecy of the suffering servant, but argued that humanity should not wait on God’s saving grace. An individual’s “faith and fellowship with God,” King wrote, were the “ultimate solution to the problem of suffering.”⁸⁷

Late that fall, having completed two of his four examinations, King reflected on his intellectual development at Boston in a revealing letter to George Davis. Agreeing with Davis’s positive review of DeWolf’s new book, King found a “great deal of similarity” between the professors and indicated that “it was not difficult at all for me to emerge from your classroom to Dr. DeWolf’s.” King assured Davis that he had not abandoned his mentor’s “warm evangelical liberalism,” even as he was becoming more sympathetic to neo-

85. Although Jackson’s election in part resulted from dissatisfaction with aging leadership that did not change with the times, he later disappointed many reformers, including King, Jr., when he refused to accept limits on his tenure. In 1961, King was forced out of the convention for supporting Gardner Taylor’s campaign against Jackson, who retained the organization’s presidency for nearly thirty years.

86. King, *My Life*, p. 90.

87. King, Qualifying examination answers, *Theology of the Bible*, pp. 206, 208 in this volume.

orthodox theology.⁸⁸ In the letter King indicated that his progress at Boston was proceeding rapidly. Both DeWolf and the late Edgar Brightman were “quite impressed” with his performance. King attributed his success to Davis: “In the most decisive moments, I find your influence creeping forth.” Updating Davis on his recent work, he indicated that he had finished taking courses and was working on his dissertation. “So far, my Dissertation title is: ‘A comparison of the concept of God in the thought of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman’. I am finding the study quite fascinating.” He hoped to be finished by the end of the following summer.⁸⁹

King’s choice of a dissertation topic reflected an interest in the nature of God that derived from both his academic studies and his preaching. In addition to several term papers on the topic, King wove the theme into a number of sermons while at Boston, including one entitled “What Does It Mean to Believe in God?”⁹⁰ In his introduction to the dissertation King explained that the concept of God should be examined because of “the central place which it occupies in any religion” and because of “the ever present need to interpret and clarify the God-concept.”⁹¹

King had not formally studied either Tillich or Wieman, but their rejection of the personality of God provided important contrasts to Boston personalism. King described the two men as “fountainhead personalities” who have “had increasing influence upon the climate of theological and philosophical thought.”⁹² Wieman was influential as a proponent of theocentrism verified by empirical observation.⁹³ Tillich shared some of Wieman’s concerns about the limitations of liberal theology but was more sympathetic to such neo-

88. King to George W. Davis, 1 December 1953, pp. 223–224 in this volume. King noted that on this point he was indebted to a “quite influential” article by Davis—an article from which King appropriated passages for several essays at Boston. See George W. Davis, “Some Theological Continuities in the Crisis Theology,” *Crozer Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (July 1950): 208–219.

89. King to George W. Davis, 1 December 1953, p. 224 in this volume. In his response Davis remarked, “You have chosen an excellent dissertation topic. It presents striking contrasts in method and content and I think you can do a good piece of work with it” (Davis to King, 7 December 1953, p. 225 in this volume).

90. King gave this sermon at First United Baptist Church in Lowell, Massachusetts, on 12 April 1953.

91. King, diss. chap. 1, p. 346 in this volume.

92. Ibid.

93. Henry Nelson Wieman (1884–1975) received his B.A. at Park College in 1906 and his B.D. at San Francisco Theological Seminary in 1910. After studies at the universities of Jena and Heidelberg and service as a Presbyterian minister, he studied with William Ernest Hocking at Harvard University, where he received his Ph.D. in 1917. After teaching at Occidental College for ten years, he became a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where he remained until 1947. He also taught at the University of Oregon (1949–1951), the University of Houston (1951–1953), and Southern Illinois University (1956–1975). For a listing of Wieman’s publications up to 1955, see King’s dissertation bibliography, pp. 541–544 in this volume. See also Wieman’s theological autobiography in *Contemporary American Theology*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Round Table press, 1932), pp. 339–352; and essays in *The Empirical Theology of Henry Nelson Wieman*, ed. Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

Introduction orthodox theologians as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner.⁹⁴ Wieman's ideas contrasted well with Tillich's: "Nothing brings out [Tillich's] position with greater clarity," one theologian observed, "than a study of his relationship with the empirical theology and religious naturalism of Henry Nelson Wieman."⁹⁵

Both Tillich and Wieman objected to conceiving of God as a personality. Personalism's anthropocentric tendency was, according to Wieman, an obstruction to religious knowledge: "We [should] not allow our wishes and needs to shape our idea of God, but shall shape it solely in the light of objective evidence."⁹⁶ God was not a being that created the universe, but the creative process that sustains good in opposition to evil. Wieman described God as "the growth of meaning and value in the world."⁹⁷ Tillich identified God as neither a being nor a process but as "being-itself," the "ground" or source of all existence. According to Tillich, the term "a personal God" was a useful religious symbol that implied but did not describe God. "To speak of God as a person," Tillich wrote, "would mean making him an object besides other objects, a being among beings, maybe the highest, but anyhow a being."⁹⁸ Tillich believed that reducing God to a mere being was blasphemous.

By early 1953, when King enrolled in a course on dissertation writing at the beginning of his research, he was fairly certain about the conclusions he would reach in his dissertation. He jotted his thoughts about the two theologians' "great weakness" on a note card written that spring as he was outlining the thesis. "Both overstress one side of the divine life," he wrote, "while minimiz[ing] another basic aspect. Wieman stress[es] the goodness of God while mi[ni]mizing His power. Tillich stresses the power of God while min[im]izing His goodness."⁹⁹

Rooted in an African-American religious tradition that perceived God as a personal force interceding in history, King found Tillich's and Wieman's con-

94. Paul Johannes Tillich (1886–1965) studied at the universities of Berlin, Tübingen, Halle, and Breslau, where he received his doctorate in philosophy in 1910. After serving as a chaplain in the German army during World War I, he taught theology at the universities of Berlin, Marburg, Dresden, Leipzig, and Frankfurt. Forced by his association with religious socialists to leave Germany in 1933, he came to the United States, where he was an instructor at New York's Union Theological Seminary until 1954. He then taught at Harvard University until leaving in 1962 for a position at the University of Chicago. For his publications up to 1955, see King's dissertation bibliography, pp. 539–541 in this volume. For more information, see *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1952); and Wilhelm Pauck and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

95. Walter Marshall Horton, "Tillich's Role in Contemporary Theology," in Kegley and Bretall, eds., *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, p. 36.

96. Wieman, "Theocentric Religion," in Ferm, ed., *Contemporary American Theology*, p. 346.

97. Henry Nelson Wieman and Regina Westcott-Wieman, *Normative Psychology of Religion* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1935), p. 137.

98. Paul Tillich, "The Idea of a Personal God," *Union Review* 2 (1940): 9.

99. King, Notes on "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," 4 February–22 May 1953, MLKP-MBU: Box 107. For a longer description of King's drafting of the dissertation, see the headnote to the dissertation, pp. 339–341 in this volume.

ceptions of divinity unworthy of worship. In the evaluative chapter of the dissertation, King expressed belief in a “living” God, not Tillich’s “being-itself” or Wieman’s “source of human good.” “In God there is feeling and will, responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart; this God both evokes and answers prayer.” Conceiving of such a God as a person was preferable to Tillich’s and Wieman’s use of abstract philosophical terms: “It would be better by far to admit that there are difficulties with an idea we know—such as personality—than to employ a term which is practically unknown to us in our experience.” King concluded that Tillich and Wieman both set forth a God who is less than personal, despite their comments to the contrary that God was more than personal, or unable to be defined by the concept of personality. “Both Tillich and Wieman reject the conception of a personal God, and with this goes a rejection of the rationality, goodness and love of God in the full sense of the words.”¹⁰⁰

Despite his disagreement with certain aspects of Tillich’s and Wieman’s conceptions of divinity, King appreciated their criticism of humanism. King approvingly noted that they both emphasized God’s immanence, or “the primacy of God over everything else in the universe.” “Such an emphasis,” he argued, “sounds a much needed note in the face of a supernaturalism that finds nature so irrational that the order of creation can no longer be discerned in it, and history so meaningless that it all bears the ‘minus sign’ of alienation from God.” Characteristically seeking to synthesize dialectically opposed positions, King asserted that “both Wieman and Tillich are partially correct in what they affirm and partially wrong in what they deny. Wieman is right in emphasizing the goodness of God, but wrong in minimizing his power. Likewise Tillich is right in emphasizing the power of God, but wrong in minimizing his goodness.”¹⁰¹

As in his other academic essays, King often appropriated the words of others without attribution. He frequently used the language of Tillich and Wieman, though it was clear from the context that he was describing their ideas. In addition to his improper use of Tillich and Wieman, King also borrowed from secondary sources without giving adequate citations. These sources included a review of Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*, a prominent collection of essays on Tillich, and a dissertation on Tillich that had been completed under DeWolf’s supervision three years earlier.¹⁰²

The readers of King’s dissertation, DeWolf and S. Paul Schilling, a professor of systematic theology who had recently arrived at Boston University, failed to notice King’s flawed use of citations. After reading a draft copy DeWolf criticized him for failing to make explicit the “presuppositions and norms employed in the critical evaluation,” but his comments were largely

100. King, diss. chap. 5, pp. 512, 524, 512, 510, 506 in this volume.

101. Ibid., pp. 518, 519, 516, 525 in this volume.

102. See Raphael Demos, Review of *Systematic Theology* by Paul Tillich, *Journal of Philosophy* 49 (1952): 692–708; articles in Kegley and Bretall, eds., *The Theology of Paul Tillich*; and Jack Boozer, “The Place of Reason in Tillich’s Conception of God” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1951).

Introduction positive. He commended King for his handling of a “difficult” topic “with broad learning, impressive ability and convincing mastery of the works immediately involved.” Schilling, for his part, found two problems with King’s citation practices but dismissed these as anomalous and praised the dissertation in his Second Reader’s report. When informed of the plagiaries many years later, Schilling conceded that in certain respects King was “guilty of shoddy scholarship” but argued that “his appropriation of the language of others does not entail inaccurate interpretation of the thought of writers cited.” Schilling concluded that his assessment of the dissertation at the time of his first reading was correct: “I stand by the comment in my Second Reader’s report: ‘The comparisons and evaluations are fair-minded, balanced, and cogent. The author shows sound comprehension and critical capacity.’”¹⁰³

As was true of King’s other academic papers, the plagiaries in his dissertation escaped detection during his lifetime. His professors at Boston, like those at Crozer, saw King as an earnest and even gifted student who presented a consistent, though evolving, theological identity in his essays, exams, and classroom comments. King’s reputation for excellent memory and his tendency to synthesize conflicting viewpoints may have obscured his reliance on borrowed ideas and words. Although the extent of King’s plagiaries suggests that he knew that he was at least skirting academic norms, the extant documents offer no direct evidence on this matter. King’s decision to save his papers and to place them in an archive suggests that his academic performance was a source of pride rather than guilt. Thus he may have simply become convinced, on the basis of his grades at Crozer and Boston, that his papers were sufficiently competent to withstand critical scrutiny. Moreover, King’s actions during his early adulthood indicate that he increasingly saw himself as a preacher appropriating theological scholarship rather than as an academic producing such scholarship.



Standing in the pulpit, King expressed his concept of God using more vivid language than in the dissertation, skillfully incorporating into his sermons only those aspects of his theological training that affirmed his ties to the religion of his parents and grandparents. King’s ability to blend these elements can be seen in his earliest known recorded sermon, “Rediscovering Lost Values.”¹⁰⁴ He delivered this sermon to a large Baptist church in Detroit in late February 1954, just days after finishing his final comprehensive examination and a few weeks before the graduate school approved his dissertation outline.

In “Rediscovering,” King referred to the account in the gospel of Luke in which Mary and Joseph, while returning to Nazareth after attending a Passover feast in Jerusalem, discover that they have unintentionally left behind

103. Schilling to King Papers Project, 5 November 1990. See also “Conversation Between S. Paul Schilling and David Thelen,” *Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (June 1991): 63–80.

104. A tape recording of the sermon at Second Baptist Church was preserved by the church’s historical committee. The recording served as the basis for the transcription of “Rediscovering Lost Values,” pp. 248–256 in this volume.

twelve-year-old Jesus. In his sermon King used the story to illustrate the tendency of individuals caught up in the tumult of the modern world to move ahead without appreciating the enduring values of the past. "If we are to go forward," he said, "if we are to make this a better world in which to live, we've got to go back. We've got to rediscover these precious values that we've left behind." Despite the many technological advances and material comforts of American society, King argued, humanity had lost the spiritual compass provided by a deep and abiding faith in God. "The real problem is that through our scientific genius we've made of the world a neighborhood, but through our moral and spiritual genius we've failed to make of it a brotherhood." King insisted that "*all* reality hinges on moral foundations," that "this is a moral universe, and that there are moral laws of the universe, just as abiding as the physical laws." Decrying ethical relativism—"Now, I'm not trying to use a big word here"—King expressed a belief in moral absolutes that evoked enthusiastic responses from the congregation.

I'm here to say to you this morning that some things are right and some things are wrong. (*Yes*) Eternally so, absolutely so. It's *wrong* to hate. (*Yes, That's right*) It always has been wrong and it always will be wrong! (*Amen*) It's wrong in America, it's wrong in Germany, it's wrong in Russia, it's wrong in China! (*Lord help him*) It was wrong in two thousand B.C., and it's wrong in nineteen fifty-four A.D.! It always has been wrong, (*That's right*) and it always will be wrong! . . . Some things in this universe are absolute. The God of the universe has made it so.¹⁰⁵

Contemporary society had lost sight of this "mighty precious value," adopting instead "a pragmatic test for right and wrong." In the modern world, he asserted, most people believed that "it's all right to disobey the Ten Commandments, but just don't disobey the Eleventh, Thou shall not get caught." The moral decay that King identified in modern culture could be recovered only by ethical living: "The thing that we need in the world today, is a group of men and women who will stand up for right and be opposed to wrong, wherever it is."¹⁰⁶

King argued that making ethical decisions was impossible without rediscovering the precious value of faith in God. Employing language from his study of Wieman, King affirmed a belief in "a God behind the process." Many people, however, including those who attended church every Sunday, had lost their faith in God. "We must remember that it's possible to affirm the existence of God with your lips and deny his existence with your life." The materialism of American consumer culture had caused some to lose sight of God; yet King cautioned, "automobiles and subways, televisions and radios, dollars and cents, can *never* be substitutes for God."¹⁰⁷

105. King, "Rediscovering Lost Values," pp. 251–252 in this volume. Here the congregation's responses, indicated in italics and parentheses, have been retained in this lengthy quotation, but they are omitted in other quotations below from "Rediscovering." They are preserved in the complete transcription.

106. *Ibid.*, pp. 249, 252 in this volume.

107. *Ibid.*, pp. 253–254 in this volume.

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King's most important sources for his sermon were the traditional ones of the African-American Baptist pulpit: the Bible and well-known hymns. Referring to a verse in Psalm 23 and a familiar hymn, King concluded by affirming faith in the God "who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death, and causes us to fear no evil," and in the God "who has been our help in ages past, and our hope for years to come, and our shelter in the time of storm, and our eternal home."¹⁰⁸ King concluded with a rousing affirmation of God as an integral part of his life: "As a young man with most of my life ahead of me, I decided early to give my life to something eternal and absolute. Not to these little gods that are here today and gone tomorrow. But to God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever."¹⁰⁹



After completing the taxing qualifying examinations, King began to search for a job, apparently convinced that he could hold a full-time position while finishing his dissertation. He may also have sensed that he had already overcome the most difficult obstacles in his doctoral studies. As one of King's fellow students later commented, "The rejoicing came when you finished your qualifying exams and the rest, writing the dissertation, was just a hurdle that you want to get finished with."¹¹⁰ King's professors had nominated him for academic positions, and offers came in from several colleges. In a letter recommending King for a position as dean of a school of religion, Crozer president Sankey L. Blanton indicated that King had "great ability" and "would do more for you while finishing the dissertation than the average man would do without any other duties besides."¹¹¹ Attaining such a position at an early age would have prepared King for one of his career ambitions: to serve as president of a historically black college such as Morehouse.¹¹² At the same time, however, King's colleagues in the ministry informed him of prominent churches that were looking for a pastor. The most tempting offers were those that combined the best elements of academic life and preaching, such as college chaplain or minister of a church that welcomed well-educated ministers.

With these considerations in mind, King responded positively to an invitation to deliver a guest sermon in January 1954 at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Two months before, his parents had informed him that one of Dexter's deacons, J. T. Brooks, had written the Kings to express Dexter's interest in their son. After hearing "so many fine things about him and his ability and possibility," Brooks was "intensely interested" in

108. King alluded to the hymn "O God, Our Help in Ages Past."

109. King, "Rediscovering Lost Values," pp. 254–255 in this volume.

110. "Conversation Between Cornish Rogers and David Thelen," p. 60.

111. King received an offer from Shaw University to become dean of its School of Religion. See William R. Strassner to King, 6 November 1952; and Sankey L. Blanton to William R. Strassner, 3 December 1952; pp. 159–160 and 164 in this volume, respectively.

112. Sybil Haydel Morial, interview with Clayborne Carson; and W. T. Handy, Jr., interview with Clayborne Carson.

having King preach at Dexter. Brooks indicated that the church was “now in process of hearing a series of prospects and would like if possible to make a decision sometime in the not too distant future.”¹¹³ One of the men scheduled to speak prior to King was his friend from Crozer Walter R. McCall. On the recommendation of Melvin Watson, the First Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, was also considering King for its pastorate, but Dexter offered greater opportunities.¹¹⁴ Its educated congregation would be receptive to King’s blend of theological scholarship and the methods of southern Baptist oratory; its pastors, moreover, had long been among the best educated in the country. The church was much smaller than other Montgomery churches, with only 365 members compared to Bethel’s 1,500 and Holt Street’s 1,200; nevertheless, its reputation well exceeded its size.

On 24 January King delivered a well-rehearsed sermon entitled “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life,” which was received by “a large and appreciative audience at Dexter.”¹¹⁵ King had delivered many other sermons as a minister, but he recalled feeling “conscious this time that I was on trial.” He assured himself that all would be well if he remembered that he was the “channel of the gospel, not the source.”¹¹⁶ Several weeks later McCall returned to the church at its behest to preach a second trial sermon. A ministerial colleague reported to King that McCall “came and fell through” and that the congregation “forgot all about him as a prospect.”¹¹⁷

Despite the competition between the two classmates, McCall was gracious in his letters to King. “If you are interested in getting that church,” he wrote, “I would be glad to put in a plug for you. Take it from me, that is a Great Church, Mike. Much honor will go to the man who gets it.” Downplaying the church’s history of conflict with its pastors, McCall advised, “Don’t let anybody tell you that that church is such a hell raiser!”¹¹⁸ King was aware that the church was not without problems. His father and others had warned him about its contentious history and its reputation as a “silk stocking church” for professionals.¹¹⁹ But King’s predecessor at Dexter, Vernon Johns, may have allayed King’s misgivings when they spoke later about the church. King admired Johns, who had preached at Ebenezer that winter, later describing him

113. J. T. Brooks to Martin Luther King, Sr., and Alberta Williams King, 16 November 1953, p. 211 in this volume.

114. King gave a trial sermon at First Baptist the Sunday before his sermon at Dexter.

115. *Montgomery Examiner*, 28 January 1954.

116. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 17.

117. Joseph C. Parker, Sr., to King, 10 March 1954, p. 258 in this volume. Some accounts suggest that McCall tried to best King with a sermon entitled “Four Dimensions of a Complete Life”; see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 110; and Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 127–128.

118. Walter R. McCall to King, 17 January 1954, p. 236 in this volume.

119. For King’s discussion of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and his first visits to it, see King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 16–18.

Introduction as “a real iconoclast, bound neither by folkways or mores . . . who never allowed any conditions of injustice to come to his attention without lashing out against [them] in no uncertain terms.”¹²⁰

In considering Dexter, King also weighed his wife’s objections to the limited educational and cultural opportunities available to blacks in the segregated South. Coretta Scott King was finishing her requirements for a degree in music education and feared that moving to the South would not only limit her musical career but also restrict teaching opportunities in the poorly funded segregated schools. King brought the dilemma to their friends in the Dialectical Society, outlining at some length the three options available to him: the pulpit in Chattanooga, Dexter’s pastorate, or a teaching position at a college such as Morehouse. Dexter’s attractiveness to King was enhanced by the opportunity to succeed Vernon Johns, a clergyman who combined theological brilliance with social commitment. Under Johns’s leadership Dexter had become less provincial and more prepared for the kind of ministry King wished to provide.

Before extending a call to King, Dexter’s pulpit committee expressed concern that King might stay at Dexter for only a few years before moving on to a teaching position. They communicated their apprehension to the Reverend Joseph C. Parker, Sr., a pastor of a Baptist church in Montgomery and a friend of King’s from Morehouse. Parker warned King that the committee wanted someone “who would stay with them a long time and not resort to teaching.” Parker advised them that “no minister knew how long he would stay with a church. But, I told them that the type of salary they offered a minister would have a great deal to do with how long he stayed with them.” With a large number of middle-class black professionals, many of whom were affiliated with Alabama State College for Negroes, Dexter could afford to pay its pastor well. When it unanimously called King to the pastorate, it offered him a salary that would make him the highest-paid black minister in the city.¹²¹

After considering his various options King accepted the offer, but because he had several more months of dissertation research to complete he arranged to spend the summer commuting between Montgomery and Boston. At the end of May, two weeks after the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*, King preached his first sermon as Dexter’s pastor, “Loving Your Enemies.” That summer King began working with the congregation to ensure that the transition to his leadership went smoothly. He insisted that the church raise funds to repair the parsonage and make other necessary improvements to the church’s facilities. On 1 September, the Kings moved into the rebuilt parsonage, and shortly thereafter King presented the congregation with his “Recommendations to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for the Fiscal Year 1954–1955.” Starting with a strong assertion of pastoral authority, King argued that his call as a

120. King, draft of *Stride Toward Freedom*, June 1957–May 1958, MLKP-MBU: Box 86A. See also King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 38.

121. Joseph C. Parker, Sr., to King, 10 March 1954, p. 257 in this volume.

preacher came primarily from God and only secondarily from the congregation. His call to Dexter's pastorate, he said, implied "the unconditional willingness of the people to accept the pastor's leadership." Yet he also suggested that the congregation should not "blindly and ignorantly genuflect" before him, "as if he were possessed of some infallible or superhuman attributes." Referring obliquely to previous tensions between Dexter's deacons and its pastor, King noted that he would neither "needlessly interfere" with the workings of the church nor assume "unnecessary dictatorial authority." He asked instead that he "be respected and accepted as the central figure around which the policies and programs of the church revolve."¹²²

After invoking broad authority on church matters, King proposed wide-ranging changes in the church's organization and finances. Relying in part on his acquaintance with his father's centralization of fiscal authority at Ebenezer, he concentrated church finances in a unified budget and treasury and suggested more than a dozen committees, including one to organize social and political action. When the congregation accepted the extensive reorganization without modification, King shared his "Recommendations" with his ministerial friends, including Melvin Watson, who praised the report as one that "happily . . . departs from the beaten path." Watson singled out the many committees as a potential problem, however. "Hectic activity in the church i[s] not necessarily an indication that the cause of the Kingdom is being promoted."¹²³

Six weeks after King presented the recommendations, Dexter officially installed him as its pastor. King's family and Ebenezer Baptist Church played integral roles in his transition to Dexter. Several buses of Ebenezer's parishioners traveled to Montgomery to participate in the service, which featured an installation sermon by King, Sr., and the Ebenezer choir directed by Alberta Williams King.¹²⁴ Afterward King expressed his enduring gratitude to the members of Ebenezer. "You can never know what your presence in such large numbers meant to me at the beginning of my pastorate," he wrote, adding that "whatever success I might achieve in my life's work you will have helped make it possible."¹²⁵

In addition to writing his dissertation, King set about becoming acquainted with his congregation and the Montgomery community. He visited the sick, met with the local ministerial associations, began implementing his recommendations, and prepared his weekly sermons. In addition to ones he had written earlier, King delivered several new sermons during his first year at Dexter, different versions of which would later be published, including "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore." Although no texts of King's sermons from this period survive, a text of "Death of Evil" delivered months later reveals

122. King, "Recommendations to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for the Fiscal Year 1954-1955," 5 September 1954, p. 287 in this volume.

123. Melvin Watson to King, 20 October 1954, p. 303 in this volume.

124. Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, "Program, Installation of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., as Pastor," 31 October 1954, figure facing p. 236 in this volume.

125. King to Ebenezer Baptist Church Members, 6 November 1954, p. 314 in this volume.

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his enduring interest in questions he had explored in graduate school. The presence of evil in the world was undeniable, he argued, but “in the long struggle between good and evil, good eventually emerges as the victor.” Evil must eventually “give way to the magnetic redemptive power of a humble servant on an uplifted cross.” Taking his theme from the story in Exodus of the Israelites’ escape from the “gripping yoke of Egyptian rule,” King saw a similar struggle between good and evil occurring in the twentieth century. “Gradually we have seen the forces of freedom and justice emerge victoriously out of some Red Sea,” King noted, “only to look back and see the forces of oppression and colonialism dead upon the seashore.” Assured by his faith in God that injustice would not survive “the rushing waters of historical necessity,” King exhorted his congregation to join the struggle. King’s confidence in humanity made him optimistic about the future: “We must believe that a prejudiced mind can be changed, and that man, by the grace of God, can be lifted from the valley of hate to the high mountain of love.”¹²⁶

Calling on his expanding network of Baptist ministers, King asked his colleagues to speak at Dexter’s special programs, including such events as Men’s Day, Women’s Day, and the church’s anniversary. King invited Walter McCall to preach at Dexter for the annual Youth Day program and initiated a Spring Lecture Series with Virginia Union University president Samuel D. Proctor as the first guest. In his letter inviting Proctor, King indicated his intention to “bring some of the best minds” to the church “to discuss some of the major doctrines and issues of the Christian Faith,” explaining that “most church people are appallingly ignorant at this point.”¹²⁷ In 1955, Morehouse president Mays accepted an invitation to serve as Men’s Day speaker, though King’s choice for the following year, Howard Thurman, had to decline the invitation. Thurman, the celebrated black theologian who had become dean of Boston University’s Marsh Chapel in 1953, noted, however, that he was “delighted” to learn of King’s work at “historic” Dexter Avenue.¹²⁸

King’s growing prominence in the Baptist community brought numerous invitations for him to speak at other churches. In addition to his forty-six sermons at Dexter that first year, King gave twenty sermons and lectures at churches and colleges throughout the South, including the Anniversary sermon at Ebenezer and a week-long lecture series at Georgia’s Fort Valley State College, where McCall served as dean of men. News of King’s achievements spread rapidly among his friends and colleagues in the Baptist community. J. Raymond Henderson complimented his old friend King, Sr., on his son’s success: “They told me you have a son that can preach rings around you any day you ascend the pulpit. How about that? If it is so, it is a compliment to you.” In a letter to King, Jr., Henderson praised the young minister but also urged him to remember his responsibilities: “You have a great heritage in your grandfather and father. I understand you are developing into a good

126. King, “The Death of Evil upon the Seashore,” 17 May 1956, MLKP-MBU: Box 119A. King preached this sermon at Dexter on 24 July 1955.

32 127. King to Samuel D. Proctor, October 1954, p. 297 in this volume.

128. Howard Thurman to King, 14 November 1955, p. 588 in this volume.

preacher in your own right. Remain careful of your conduct. Steer away from 'trashy' preachers. Be worthy of the best. It may come to you some day."¹²⁹ On another occasion, fearing that King's popularity might have negative effects on his personal and spiritual well-being, his father wrote him a cautionary letter: "You see young man you are becoming very popular. As I told you you must be much in prayer. Persons like yourself are the ones the devil turns all of his forces alose to destroy."¹³⁰

In addition to representing Dexter in the various Montgomery church associations, King strengthened his ties to the National Baptist Convention. During his first year at Dexter he attended ten conclaves of the convention, speaking at several of them, including the annual meeting of the Woman's Auxiliary. Afterward Nannie Helen Burroughs, the auxiliary's president, thanked him for "the challenging message" and informed him that "the delegates were profoundly impressed. What your message did to their thinking and to their faith is 'bread cast upon the water' that will be seen day by day in their good works in their communities."¹³¹ In addition to providing service at the convention's annual meeting, King joined an advisory council to the convention's National Baptist Training Union Board.¹³² Shortly after King's arrival in Montgomery, the local affiliate of the convention in the area, the Montgomery-Antioch District Association, elected him as the group's reporter.¹³³ National Baptist Convention president J. H. Jackson declined King's invitation to preach at Dexter, but he noted cordially that "I am delighted to know of the great work that you are doing at Dexter."¹³⁴

J. Pius Barbour, the iconoclastic editor of the *National Baptist Voice* and King's friend and mentor from his Crozer days, was alone in suggesting that King's intellectual talents would be better served outside Montgomery and the South. Drawing on his own experience as a minister in Montgomery, Barbour derided the city's "superficial intellectuality" and advised that King should not be deceived by his success at Dexter, by the "Triple Attendance and Triple collection." "Son," Barbour wrote, "hard liberty is to be prefe[r]red to servile pomp!"¹³⁵ In a later letter, Barbour commented on King's choice of a dissertation topic: "Tillich is all wet. . . . Being-Itself is a meaningless abstraction." He also reiterated his warning about King's southern pastorate, noting that he felt "sorry for you with all that learning." "Don[']t get stuck there," he wrote, "move on to a big metropolitan center in THE NORTH, or some town as ATLANTA. You will dry rot there."¹³⁶

129. Letters from J. Raymond Henderson to King, Sr., and King, Jr., 12 May 1955, pp. 555–556 in this volume.

130. Martin Luther King, Sr., to King, Jr., 2 December 1954, p. 320 in this volume.

131. Nannie Helen Burroughs to King, 21 September 1954, p. 296 in this volume.

132. Roland Smith to King, 10 December 1954, p. 320 in this volume.

133. King, "Montgomery-Antioch Ass'n. Endorses Wilson and Washington," *Baptist Leader*, 4 November 1954, p. 312 in this volume.

134. J. H. Jackson to King, 28 September 1955, p. 573 in this volume.

135. J. Pius Barbour to King, 21 December 1954, p. 323 in this volume.

136. J. Pius Barbour to King, 21 July 1955, pp. 565–566 in this volume.

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Barbour's warnings notwithstanding, King found an active community committed to challenging the status quo. Several organizations and institutions in Montgomery offered opportunities for King to emulate his father's and grandfather's model of the politically active preacher. He quickly sought out the local racial reform groups, meeting most of the politically active black community leaders during his first year. King attended the monthly meetings of the Alabama Council on Human Relations, an affiliate of the Southern Regional Council, the only significant interracial reform group in Montgomery. He also served briefly as the organization's vice president. Though not involved in protest activity per se, the group served "to keep the desperately needed channels of communication open between the races."¹³⁷ Several members of King's own congregation were among the most dedicated community activists in the city. Rufus Lewis, a former Alabama State football coach and owner of a funeral home, formed the Citizens Club in the late 1940s to facilitate voter registration and voting, and Mary Fair Burks and Jo Ann Robinson, both professors at Alabama State, each served a term as president of the Women's Political Council, which promoted voter registration and protested the treatment of African Americans on city buses. After the arrest on 2 March 1955 of a young black woman, Claudette Colvin, for violating the city's segregation laws, Robinson initiated two meetings with the mayor and bus company officials to discuss the case. Robinson, Lewis, and Burks were joined by longtime NAACP activists E. D. Nixon and Rosa Parks at the meetings; King, who had been in the city for just six months, accompanied his parishioners to one of the meetings.¹³⁸

King appreciated the civil rights activities of the members of his congregation and, as part of his reorganization of the church, appointed several activists to the newly formed Social and Political Action Committee. Chaired by Robinson and Burks, the committee encouraged voter registration and urged every church member to join the NAACP.¹³⁹ In its reports to the congregation, the committee provided information about local and national politics, including a special briefing on the second *Brown v. Board of Education* case.¹⁴⁰ It also published the name of every registered voter in the congregation, a group that, by late 1955, constituted more than half the congregation and both Kings.¹⁴¹

137. King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, pp. 32–33.

138. Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, ed. David J. Garrow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), pp. 40–41.

139. Guided by Robinson, Burks, and Lewis, Dexter encouraged voter registration prior to King's arrival. At a church service the week before King delivered his trial sermon, Dexter's board of ushers urged everyone to register for the upcoming election. See *Montgomery Examiner*, 21 January 1954.

140. Elmer Heningburg Reynolds and Mary Fair Burks, "The NAACP and the Supreme Court," in Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, *Social and Political Action Committee Digest*, June 1955, MLKP-MBU: Box 77.

141. Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, *Social and Political Action Committee Digest*, December 1955, MLKP-MBU: Box 77. According to the committee's report, approximately 200 Dexter members were registered voters, out of a congregation of 367.

In addition to encouraging Dexter members to join the NAACP, King himself became increasingly involved in that group, attending the local branch's monthly meetings and on occasion speaking at NAACP gatherings. The Reverend Ralph David Abernathy, the young pastor of First Baptist Church and chaplain of Alabama State College, stimulated King's increasing involvement and became a strong supporter of the newly arrived minister. Abernathy and King had met several years before when King, still a student at Crozer, delivered a sermon at Ebenezer. Abernathy was at the time enrolled at Atlanta University and had heard about the young preacher's powerful style; he therefore visited Ebenezer, where he listened to the sermon "burning with envy at [King's] learning and confidence."¹⁴² When King arrived at Dexter, Abernathy had already become one of Montgomery's more prominent ministers.¹⁴³ Following the *Brown* decision, he chaired the state Sunday School and Baptist Training Union Congress's committee to assess the ruling, issuing a report which insisted that Christians should struggle against injustice: "Segregation is an evil that sep[a]rates men and hampers true brotherhood. Jesus is against it and He wants us to fight it. . . . Our business as Christians is to get rid of a system that creates bad men." He then urged the ministers to "return to their respective communities determined to fight this evil until Black Men of Alabama are privileged to enjoy every God-given opportunity as any other man."¹⁴⁴ Early in January 1955, Abernathy arranged for King to give the installation address for the officers and executive committee of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP and its women's auxiliary. According to notes taken by branch secretary Rosa Parks, King "called for a great deal of work, reserve and thinking." He told the branch members: "We have come a long way, but still have a long way to go. We owe a debt of gratitude to those [who] made possible the Supreme Court decision of May 17."¹⁴⁵

A few weeks later, King delivered a stronger statement of his views when the Birmingham branch of the NAACP invited him to speak at the installation ceremony for its officers. He criticized the apathy of church leaders on political issues: "'You must do more than pray and read the Bible' to destroy segregation and second-class citizenship," the local newspaper reported him as saying; "'you must do something about it.'" Registering for the vote and supporting the NAACP with "big money" would prove critical in the struggle against segregation: "A voteless people," King reportedly said, "is a powerless people." Likewise, he "recommended using the courts more to obtain unjustly denied rights" and "called for an immediate start toward the implementation

142. Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, p. 89. Abernathy (1926–1990) received his B.S. from Alabama State College in 1950 and studied for his M.S. at Atlanta University in the early 1950s, receiving the degree in 1958. He became pastor of First Baptist Church in 1952 and served until 1961, when he became pastor of Atlanta's West Hunter Street Baptist Church.

143. Abernathy's activities are noted in *Baptist Leader*, 4 November 1954, 17 March 1955.

144. Abernathy, "The Report of the Committee on the Recent Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation in Public Education," *Baptist Leader*, 2 September 1954. As King was in the process of moving to Montgomery after a summer of commuting, he did not attend the congress.

145. Rosa Parks, Minutes, Montgomery Branch NAACP meeting, 9 January 1955, MNAACP-NN-Sc.

Introduction of the May 17 U.S. Supreme Court decision banning the segregated school system.”¹⁴⁶ After seeing an announcement for King’s speech, one veteran NAACP activist in Georgia congratulated King for his support of the association. “I have followed with interest all of your activities,” W. W. Law wrote, “and am very happy over the very rapid strides you have made.” Law remembered that King’s involvement in the NAACP began at Morehouse, noting that “to see you continue interest in this very worthwhile organization (I like to think of it as a movement) in Freedom’s cause, now that you have assumed community leadership, is heartwarming.”¹⁴⁷

On 19 June 1955, King was the featured speaker at a mass meeting of the Montgomery branch. Introducing his pastor to the gathering, R. D. Nesbitt lauded King as a great asset to black Montgomery, distinguishing himself “in everything for the betterment of the community” and launching “an extensive campaign” at Dexter to recruit voters and NAACP members. King’s address on the “Peril of Complacency in the Fight for Civil Rights” reiterated many of the points he had made in his Birmingham speech. According to Rosa Parks’s notes, he stated:

Jim Crow is on his deathbed but the battle is not yet won. There is no time to pause and be complacent. We must do everything to keep it down. [King] gave a brief history of progress made by Negroes in the past 50 years. We must pay for our freedom, [develop] courageous leaders and not be afraid to take a stand for our freedom. We must continue to get the ballot and speak through our vote. With the NAACP we must fight through legislation, and teach love through education.¹⁴⁸

After the speech, King accepted an invitation to join the branch’s executive committee. Parks welcomed him to the staff in a cordial letter, explaining that King’s “outstanding contribution” merited his appointment.¹⁴⁹

As he ended his first year as pastor of Dexter, King used the annual report to his congregation as an opportunity to reflect on his accomplishments as a minister and community leader. In addition to reporting increased church membership and financial receipts, King celebrated the congregation’s enthusiastic participation on the various boards and committees initiated the previous year. He singled out for special praise the “superb” work of the Social and Political Action Committee: “Through the work of this committee many persons have become registered voters and Dexter has led all other church[es] of Montgomery in contributions to the NAACP.” King heaped accolades on all aspects of the church, noting that “the wonders that have come about at Dex-

¹⁴⁶. “Apathy Among Church Leaders Hit in Talk by Rev. M. L. King,” *Birmingham World*, 25 January 1955, p. 331 in this volume. King would later deliver the speech, entitled “A Realistic Approach to Progress in Race Relations,” on many occasions.

¹⁴⁷. W. W. Law to King, 14 January 1955, p. 329 in this volume.

¹⁴⁸. Rosa Parks, Minutes, Montgomery Branch NAACP mass meeting, 19 June 1955, MNAACP-NN-Sc.

¹⁴⁹. Rosa Parks to King, 26 August 1955, p. 572 in this volume. See also Parks, Minutes, Montgomery Branch NAACP meeting, 14 August 1955, MNAACP-NN-Sc.

ter this year were not due so much to my leadership, but to the greatness of your fellowship.” King warned the congregation, though, that it should not forget its “tremendous responsibilities” to continue its spiritual growth and remain politically active: “Institutions, like men, can so easily fall into moribund conditions when they project their visions merely to past achievements rather than future challenges. There is nothing more tragic than to see a church drowning in the deep waters of spiritual stagnancy, and at the last moment reaching out for some thin straw of past achievement in an attempt to survive.” In a prophetic concluding invocation, King encouraged the congregation to expand its activities in the Montgomery community: “Let each of us go out at this moment with grim and bold determination to extend the horizons of Dexter to new boundaries, and lift the spire of her influence to new heights, so that we will be able to inject new spiritual blood into the veins of this community, transforming its jangling discords into meaningful symphonies of spiritual harmony.”¹⁵⁰

As King reflected on his successful first year as pastor, he also moved to a new stage in his family life. On 17 November 1955, Coretta Scott King gave birth to the Kings’ first child, Yolanda Denise. King wrote his friend H. Edward Whitaker, “I am now the proud father of a little daughter. . . . Yolanda Denise. She is now about thirteen days old, and she is keeping her father quite busy walking the floor.”¹⁵¹ Having become a father as well as an increasingly influential pastor and civil rights leader, King was prepared to realize his long-standing ambition to “serve humanity.” During his first years at Crozer, King had been estranged from his roots, but by the time he entered Boston University he had rediscovered the liberating potential of his African-American Baptist heritage. Forging an eclectic synthesis from such diverse sources as personalism, theological liberalism, neo-orthodox theology, and the activist, Bible-centered religion of his family, King affirmed his abiding faith in a God who was both a comforting personal presence and a powerful spiritual force acting in history for righteousness. This faith would sustain him as the movement irreversibly transformed his life. Several weeks after his report to the Dexter congregation, he used similar language to praise the united African-American community at the initial mass meeting of the Montgomery bus boycott. “Right here in Montgomery, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, ‘There lived a race of people, a *black* people, fleecy locks and black complexion, but a people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization.’”¹⁵²

150. King, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church Annual Report, 1 October 1954–31 October 1955, pp. 578–580 in this volume.

151. King to H. Edward Whitaker, 30 November 1955, p. 593 in this volume.

152. Montgomery Improvement Association, “First mass meeting, Holt Street Baptist Church.” 5 December 1955, MLKJrP-GAMK; to be published in *Papers* 3.