



1 A HOMILETICAL BIOGRAPHY

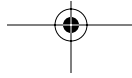
And the child grew and became strong in spirit.

LUKE 1:80

I am . . . the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher and the great grandson of a Baptist preacher. The Church is my life and I have given my life to the Church.”¹

With this succinct autobiographical statement Martin Luther King Jr. summarized the professional stock from which he sprang—one in which preaching loomed large and all-consuming. Yet he is telling us more. King first entered our world through the womb of the black church tradition which, as several biographers like Lewis Baldwin, James Cone, Taylor Branch and others attest, remained his conscious ancestral home, continually feeding and flavoring his religious and educational development as well as his clerical activities.² Later influences on King are understood to have provided form, nomenclature, and refinement to lifelong concepts derived initially from the black church.

The preacher heritage to which he refers consisted of Rev. Martin Luther King Sr., father; Rev. A. D. Williams, grandfather; and another Rev. Mr. Williams, great-grandfather. The Baptist preacher of whom Dr. King was a great-grandson ministered during the early days of the family’s history in Georgia. Because this was his maternal great-grandfather, Dr. King directed me to his mother, Mrs. Alberta King, for biographical information.³ Mrs. King said of her son’s great-grandfather, “Many times I heard my father talk about him, an Old Country preacher, not widely known. I never knew him, as he died long before I was born when my father was very young.”⁴ She continued, “All I can remember is he was an Old Country preacher, Rev. Williams, Greene County, Ga.”





King's maternal grandfather, Adam Daniel Williams, the second preacher in his heritage, began his Atlanta pastorate in 1894, one year after the death of Frederick Douglass and one year before the celebrated "Atlanta Speech" of Booker T. Washington.⁵ Pastoring the Ebenezer Baptist Church until his death in 1931, Rev. Williams's ministry functioned under the shadow of four significant molders of thought regarding the place of the emancipated Negro in American society. These four—Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey—represented up to that time what is generally regarded as the most talented leadership in the history of Negro resistance to racial segregation and discrimination.

Douglass the protester (the first great national Negro leader and the boyhood idol of Martin Luther King Jr.) would seek full citizenship of the Negro by sustained contention and political and legal maneuvers within the system.

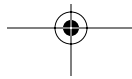
Washington the conciliator would operate through compromise with, and acceptance of, the system, advocating the proving of self and race via head, hand and heart education.

Du Bois the revolutionary would work (sometimes on the edges of and sometimes outside of the system) by marshaling white liberal and Negro militant forces mainly through the "mightier pen." It was Du Bois who, in June 1905, summoned the first assembly of the Niagara Movement, the civil and human rights organization that developed into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Garvey the black nationalist would call for separation from the system through the abandonment of the United States and the creation of a Negro state in Africa.⁶ A later heir of Garvey's approach was Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Black Muslims of the Nation of Islam, with whom the human rights approach of King Jr. would later clash.

It is quite probable that Williams was not unconscious of these divergent voices and may have been influenced by all. By virtue of his heading the large Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, not only the city of Washington's famous address and the headquarters (for a while) of Du Bois's activities but also the center of Negro militancy, Williams moved to the forefront as one of the early leaders of Atlanta's NAACP.

Martin Luther King Sr. succeeded his father-in-law, A. D. Williams, as pastor of Ebenezer in 1931. Continuing the tradition of his predecessor, King Sr. found a place among the leading spirits of the modern Negro resistance cause in





Atlanta. The context of his leadership and his method of action were perhaps prevalent among Negro clergymen of his day:

Negro preachers, men made in the image of King the elder and his father-in-law, were pivotally successful in molding the leadership tradition of this movement, a tradition that stressed lyrical and somewhat effulgent oratory and a cautious “realistic” approach to the problems of a racial minority which lacked absolute initiative vis-à-vis their oppressors and had to attack therefore with tact and with caution. The limitations of this tradition, its inarticulation with the great masses of Negroes and its reliance on the goodwill and generosity of the oppressors, were, in part, a reflection of the Negro situation, a situation defined by powerlessness.⁷

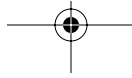
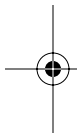
The NAACP, dominated in the beginning by white liberals, awakened the Negro to a whole new vista of respectable social protest—litigation, lobbying, propaganda of enlightenment. During the 1920s branches of the organization sprang up in all sections of the United States, not excluding Atlanta, a hub for the spokes of the “new protest.” While frightening some Negroes of that day, the “new protest” seemed tame enough to others, including Asa Philip Randolph,⁸ then a young labor leader deriding sterile protest and calling for a breakthrough to the masses.

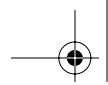
Birth, family and environment. In such an arena of activity Martin the younger was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. Ten months later, November 13, the nation would experience the death of the “big bull market,” the dying of Coolidge-Hoover prosperity, the crash of the American economy.⁹ Atlanta, like other cities, struggled for survival.

During this time of economic turmoil King Sr., who served as associate pastor to his father-in-law two years before the latter’s death, was also sharing the twelve-room house of his in-laws, thus rendering himself sufficiently secure to provide for his family. He eventually assumed full responsibility for both the parish and the household.

This period of American history witnessed a rural population decrease and an increase in urban residence. Negroes were migrating from the South and its segregationist and discriminatory policies in quest of better times in the North. By 1930, 20 percent of African Americans were living in cities of the North.¹⁰

A significant segment of Protestantism, meanwhile, was going through a transition from hard-core fundamentalism to a searching liberalism. Many Protestant clergymen abandoned traditional Christian doctrines such as the infallibility of Scripture, the bodily resurrection of Jesus and miracles and embraced what Wil-





liam Hordern calls “a reconstruction of orthodox Christianity.”¹¹

Although the fundamentalist saw the liberals as subversives of the faith, liberals saw themselves as the saviors of the essence of Christianity. For the liberal, it was the fundamentalist who was destroying Christianity by forcing it into the molds of the past and making it impossible for any intelligent man to hold it. Typical of the attitude of liberals was the oft-quoted statement of Fosdick that, for him, it was not a question of new theology or old but a question of new theology or no theology.¹²

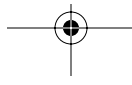
Liberalism, which would later have a significant effect on Martin Jr., was an attempt to modernize Christianity, to reframe it in thought forms believed to be more comprehensible to the modern world. Seeking to reconcile Christianity with modern science and scholarship, liberalism refused to accept religious beliefs on the basis of authority alone; instead it demanded that all theology pass the bar of reason and experience, using higher criticism as one of its basic tools.¹³ One of the important elements of liberalism, as well as later neo-orthodoxy, especially in relation to the ministry of Martin Luther King Jr., was the “social gospel,” a school of theology that could claim as its champions men like Reinhold Niebuhr. (An explanatory discussion of the social gospel can be found in chapter six under “Themes.”)

Martin Jr. would later encounter liberal theology during his senior year at Crozer Theological Seminary. In his book *Strength to Love* King graphically describes his intellectual journey from a strict fundamentalist tradition to what he calls a more satisfying liberalism. Certain aspects of liberal theology held lasting appeal for young Martin:

- devotion to the search for truth
- insistence on an open and analytical mind
- refusal to abandon the best lights of reason¹⁴

Eventually, however, he became disenchanted with liberalism’s theological anthropology, which taught essentially the natural goodness of human beings and the natural power of human reason. The tragedies of history and humanity’s consistent inclination to war, bloodshed, graft, corruption and injustice caused King to see the depths and strength of sin. He then charged liberalism with having a “superficial optimism concerning human nature” and with overlooking human beings’ inability to rid themselves of sinfulness.

Although King Jr. abandoned liberal theology’s doctrine of humanity, he did not return to fundamentalism; rather, he began to consider neo-orthodoxy (or what L. Harold DeWolf would prefer calling neo-Reformation theology) as



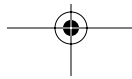


championed by such renowned theological thinkers as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich.¹⁵ Here is King's own assessment of his consideration of neo-orthodoxy:

Although I rejected some aspects of liberalism, I never came to an all-out acceptance of neo-orthodoxy. While I saw neo-orthodoxy as a helpful corrective for a sentimental liberalism, I felt that it did not provide an adequate answer to basic questions. If liberalism was too optimistic concerning human nature, neo-orthodoxy was too pessimistic. Not only on the question of man, but also on other vital issues, the revolt of neo-orthodoxy went too far. In its attempt to preserve the transcendence of God, which had been neglected by an overstress of his immanence in liberalism, neo-orthodoxy went to the extreme of stressing a God who was hidden, unknown, and "wholly other." In its revolt against overemphasis on the power of reason in liberalism, neo-orthodoxy fell into a mood of anti-rationalism and semi-fundamentalism, stressing a narrow uncritical biblicism. This approach, I felt, was inadequate both for the church and for personal life.

So although liberalism left me unsatisfied on the question of the nature of man, I found no refuge in neo-orthodoxy, I am now convinced that the truth about man is found neither in liberalism nor in neo-orthodoxy. Each represents a partial truth. A large segment of Protestant liberalism defined man only in terms of his essential nature, his capacity for good; neo-orthodoxy tended to define man only in terms of his existential nature, his capacity to evil. An adequate understanding of man is found neither in the thesis of liberalism nor in the antithesis of neo-orthodoxy, but in a synthesis which reconciles the truths of both.¹⁶

DeWolf places King Jr. with "moderate" liberals such as John C. Bennett, then president of Union Theological Seminary (New York), and Walter G. Muelder, at the time dean of the School of Theology, Boston University. "Moderate liberalism," according to DeWolf, continues the theological stress of applying "Christian principles not only to personal life but also to the solution of the great social problems of our time" but differs from pure liberalism in that it is not visionary concerning the nature of humankind.¹⁷ Moderate liberal theologians are deeply aware of the desperate sinfulness "embedded and perpetuated in social relations and institutions." Confident that "the power and love of God can outmatch all other powers, moderate liberals have sought to give appropriate and healing expression to this faith in social policy," concerned especially with selfish and materialistic structures as seen in (1) much economic policy, (2) the sensual indulgence of conspicuous consumption, (3) the denial of brotherhood between





racess and classes, and (4) the warring hostilities between nations, which threaten world catastrophe.

This discussion of religious liberalism is called for here given the condition of flux and change in the theological world during the 1930s, the years when Rev. King Sr., a Baptist preacher of the fundamentalist order, was guiding young Martin Jr., the whole King family and his church along traditional paths of evangelical religion.

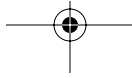
Under the leadership of King the elder, Ebenezer grew from a membership of six hundred to four thousand.¹⁸ Such phenomenal growth likely indicates good leadership and effective communication—qualities that King Jr. inherited. Not only were young Martin, his sister Willie Christine (one year older) and his brother Alfred Daniel (one year younger) reared in an atmosphere that promoted public speaking, but public address seemed destined to become the salient source of the family's income.

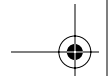
During most of the time that King Jr. led the civil rights movement, Willie Christine taught in a Baptist college for girls, Martin Jr. ministered as associate pastor with their father in Atlanta, and Alfred Daniel also pastored in Atlanta. That the daughter should follow the occupation of the mother, Alberta King, and the sons that of the father suggests a strong influence exerted by the parents. In any event, children of the King household were taught "to love and respect . . . parents and elders. The old-fashioned verities of hard work, honesty, thrift, order and courtesy were adhered to faithfully. Education was looked upon as the path to competence and culture. The church was the path to morality and immortality."¹⁹

King's Personality

Physical aspects. Martin Jr. could have easily been taken for an athlete—five feet seven inches tall, broad shoulders, muscular neck, tipping the scales at "a heavy-chested 173 lbs."²⁰ Though his physique may have struck the eye as being that of a lightweight pugilist, his slender hands suggested a less rough profession. London Wainwright observed that King's hands were "tapered and slim, delicate adjuncts of his compelling voice."²¹

The first detailed biographical sketch of King said that "Dr. King is a rather soft spoken man with a learning and maturity far beyond his twenty-seven years. His clothes are in conservative good taste and he has a small trim mustache."²² Perhaps the most descriptive observation of the physical King came from his first





biographer, L. D. Reddick:

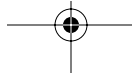
King's face is boyish. His features are soft and rounded, except for his eyes, which have a slight Oriental slant. His lips and nose are full and well formed; his forehead is rather high with a receding hairline. His clear brown eyes sparkle. He wears a small mustache. . . . King keeps his crinkly black hair close cut and well trimmed. . . . In a word, Martin Luther King is an attractive, healthy, physical type, easy going, with good motor control and all of his senses active. His robust health is perhaps part of the basis for his energy and poise.²³

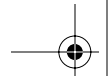
In short, the man was quite gifted physically. His paper for a class at Crozer Seminary admitted as much: "From the very beginning I was an extraordinarily healthy child. It is said that at my birth the doctors pronounced me a one hundred percent perfect child, from a physical point of view. Even today this physical harmony still abides, in that I hardly know how an ill moment feels."²⁴

Emotional aspects. King was a man of even temperament, amazing calm and an almost imperturbable equilibrium. He offered the following cryptic self-analysis: "I am an ambivert—half introvert and half extrovert."²⁵ Although biographers invariably relate instances of his early "nonviolent" tendencies, they also point out the element of tension between his introversion and extroversion.

Young Martin twice attempted suicide before his thirteenth birthday. The first attempt came after his brother A. D. slid down a banister and accidentally knocked their grandmother unconscious. Thinking his grandmother mortally injured, Martin dashed to a second-floor window and jumped. Lying motionless on the ground, oblivious to hysterical screams, he seemed dead. But "then, as though nothing had happened, he got up and walked away."²⁶ A second leap from the second-floor window occurred in 1941 on the death of his grandmother. Again he survived, sustaining mere minor bruises. These responses, against the backdrop of his customary shunning of schoolboy spats and fights, suggest that with King we are dealing with "a man of considerable complexity."²⁷

Further insight into the emotional makeup of the man comes from observing his parents. Father King has been characterized by such terms as "volatile," "emotional," "trigger-tempered"; Alberta King has been called "calm," "cool," "slow to anger," "deliberate in speech and action."²⁸ The pendulum of King's emotional makeup seems to have swung in the direction of his mother. King Jr. exuded an easygoing, unaffected friendliness.





According to Reddick, “King’s naturalness is felt by everyone who comes face to face with him. To meet him is to enter an atmosphere of simplicity, free of pretense or posing. He smiles and shakes hands easily. He is unhurried. He never seems to respond impulsively or impatiently.”²⁹ Sometimes depicted as possessing a limited sense of humor, as laughing only “politely, a split second too late,”³⁰ he was also known to be at times the “life of the party.” Again Reddick comments: “Never given to clowning in public, King will regale his friends at private parties with his imitations of religious entertainers and fellow preachers.”³¹

King explained his more general lack of humor in reference to certain encounters he had after the movement began in Montgomery. He admitted: “I’m sure I’ve become more serious. I don’t think I’ve lost my sense of humor, but I know I’ve let many opportunities go by without using it. I seldom joke in speeches any more. I forget to.”³²

In an interview with Wainwright, King confessed to being too tolerant: “It is one of my weaknesses as a leader. I’m too courteous and I’m not candid enough. However, I feel that my softness has helped in one respect: People have found it easy to become reconciled around me.”³³

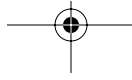
Wainwright warns, however, against misinterpreting such attitudes in King: “The impression of otherworldliness, or passivity, does not last. However gentle King’s voice, however soft his mien, these attitudes cannot completely mask the mind behind them. It is brilliant, one-track and tough, constantly on the move toward its single goal.”³⁴

Wainwright also made the following observation:

When he is not on a platform, King does not at first convey any overpowering strength of personality. A deferential conversationalist, he replies to questions with as much courtesy as conviction. He often seems curiously at rest, even somnolent. He appears beyond surprise, beyond disappointment, beyond jubilation, a man who has seen it all before and knew it would all happen.³⁵

Spiritual aspects. If any one word could express King’s spiritual motivation, it would be *love*. He never ceased to emphasize that at the heart of the nonviolent movement was the principle of love. “The nonviolent resister,” he contended, “not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him.”³⁶

This love to which King would have all humanity subject is described as “understanding,” “redeeming good will for all men,” “purely spontaneous,” “unmotivated,” “groundless,” “creative.” Averred King, “It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object. It is the love of God operating in the human





heart.”³⁷ The importance and significance of King’s ethic of love were explored by Carl T. Rowan, successor to Edward R. Murrow and former director of the U.S. Information Agency, who sketched a contrast between King, an apostle of love, and W. E. B. Du Bois, an apostle of its counterpart:

[Du Bois and King] personify the colored man’s quandary: whether to fight hate with hate or with love. Du Bois is an old man whose cup of racial bitterness runneth over—a nonagenarian brooding out his last days in a desperate admiration of things Russian and an irreconcilable hatred of things white American. King, a mere thirty [thirty-seven in 1966], is a bright new intellectual general in America’s racial wars, unique in that he offers the refuge of love to those who might follow Du Bois down that forlorn trail of bitterness.

The contrast between these two leaders goes to the very heart of the Negro’s dilemma—and perhaps to that of a Western world trying to establish rapport with the emerging masses of Asia and Africa. . . .

Martin Luther King brings to his mission a belief in the power of religion to move men; Du Bois brought an open contempt for organized religion. The Montgomery pastor seems to know the difference between being courageous and being pugnacious; Du Bois never did. . . .

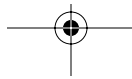
Because the stakes are so great today for all mankind, one puts down the Du Bois biography with a passionate hope that the strife will be neither so grim nor so daily as Will Du Bois expects. And one cannot escape the concomitant hope that love can—indeed, will—be the powerful, saving force that the young man from Montgomery thinks it is.³⁸

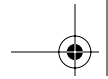
King the elder; King the younger. It is only natural that one would attempt to compare the two Kings who copastored the same congregation, Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Actually the men probably lend themselves more easily to contrast. Physically, King Sr. was a much larger man, weighing over two hundred pounds. The father exuded a forwardness and confidence that bordered on arrogance. He was equally outspoken. One day when King Jr. was about eight years old, the father took him downtown to a shoe store and sat in its front area awaiting service. A white clerk approached and said, “I’ll be happy to wait on you if you’ll just move back there to those seats in the rear.”

“Nothing wrong with these seats,” the elder King retorted.

“Sorry,” said the clerk, “but you’ll have to go back there.”

“We’ll either buy shoes sitting here,” the father shot back, flaring up, “or we won’t buy any shoes at all.” Then taking the hand of his son, he stomped, fuming, from the store.³⁹





King the elder generally demanded courteous treatment from whites and expressed readiness to demonstrate that his actions could speak as loudly as his words. Well within his rights as dictated by self-respect, he often made on-the-spot protest against the system of segregation. The son tended more toward observing, contemplating, marshaling a strategy and a philosophy with which to strike at the root of the disgraceful system. King Jr.'s presence was quiet and unassuming, while the father made it known that he did not necessarily adhere to "nonviolence," the term that became a watchword of the younger. The father smiled freely, laughed heartily and got angry quickly; the son presented a directly opposite tendency. King the elder was strongly opinionated; the younger offered a more willing ear to the opinions of others. While expressing all due respect for his firstborn son and colleague in ministry, King Sr. sometimes informed an audience that had come expecting to hear the son preach that he too was a preacher of no mean magnitude. Yet the son was not known to let slip the slightest suggestion of self-laudation.

A former Morehouse professor who had the rare privilege of teaching both father King and son King revealed that in academic performance King the younger had the edge over his father. He hastened to add, however, that it is to be considered that the elder King entered college as a much older man.⁴⁰

There were, of course, points of similarity. Both were staunch supporters of human rights; both affirmed that the pulpit holds not only a spiritual but also a social responsibility for the sheep of God's flock. Both were Baptist preachers, the father of the fundamentalist tradition, the son in a more liberal strain.

This excursion over the landscape of the heritage of Martin Luther King Jr. brings to view a soil fertile with discipline, rich with religion, pregnant with possibilities for Christian preaching.

The Seed: King's Education

When his sister, Christine, started attending the Yonge Street Elementary School in 1934, five-year-old Martin, precocious and talkative, tagged along and enrolled also by pushing his age up a year. The secret became known to the teacher when Martin gave himself away by artlessly talking about his last birthday party. He was dismissed and made to wait another year.

Elementary and high school days. From the very outset, Martin liked going to school. "He was a good pupil, and during the course of his elementary and secondary education skipped about three grades."⁴⁰ For two years, 1935-1937, he





attended Yonge Street Elementary; then he transferred to David T. Howard Elementary School (later Howard became a high school). From Howard he went to the Laboratory High of Atlanta University, a private school, where he was a B+ student. After two years, the private school closed; Martin then returned to public school, one which his grandfather, A. D. Williams, had been influential in persuading the city of Atlanta to build, Booker T. Washington High. Here he skipped both the ninth and the twelfth grades.

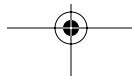
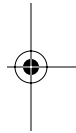
The first fifteen years of Martin's life seem to have been stable and relatively privileged: "Physically, he was healthy. Intellectually, he was slightly ahead of his agegroup. Socially, he was enjoying the threshold years of self-discovery and the companionship of the opposite sex. He wore good clothes, had a little money in the bank—and was willing to work for more."⁴²

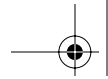
For precocious Martin, high school activities included membership in several clubs and participation in a number of public speaking events. In his senior year, 1944, he won both the local and regional Elks oratorical contest. He considered the accomplishment the "summit of his youthful achievements"; some twenty years later he remembered the subject of the oration as "something about the Negro and the Constitution."⁴³ It was destined to be a recurring theme in his career addresses.

Morehouse College. At only fifteen, King matriculated in Morehouse College in Atlanta, of which the famed Benjamin Mays was president. Mays, minister-teacher who had received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, had set into operation a plan for early admissions at Morehouse. The plan essentially provided for admitting pre-eighteen-year-olds upon evidence (through a series of qualifying examinations) of high intelligence and emotional maturity.

Lloyd O. Lewis, professor emeritus at Morehouse and King's first public speaking teacher, remembers him as "attentive," "serious minded," "open minded (though having a mind of his own)" and a "thinker at fifteen."⁴⁴ Mays similarly recollected a "serious minded" lad who "listened more intently than most other students when anyone spoke in chapel."⁴⁵

According to Lewis, while there was no Department of Speech at Morehouse in the early 1940s, effective oral expression was salient among the curriculum requirements. Every student had to take at least one course in the fundamentals of public speaking. Concerning King's performance in the speech class, Lewis remembered little "outstanding" for which to single him out except that the young man possessed unusual "poise" and "self-reliance."⁴⁶





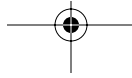
The intense interest in public address young King had discovered in high school continued throughout his time at Morehouse. The environment was unusually favorable, with varied outlets for speech activities. Lewis enumerated such things as weekly assemblies and chapels, student body meetings (when students could set forth and defend their propositions and opinions) and classes themselves. Recalling the meaningful informality surrounding a student's address, the professor told of one day when he interrupted a student assembly speaker who mispronounced a word. "Nipping it in the bud"—correcting the speech violation then and there rather than awaiting a later time—not only reinforced the correct pronunciation in the mind of the embarrassed speaker but also made an indelible impression on the auditors, among whom were other students of public speaking. Another opportunity at Morehouse for encouraging the development of good speech was the annual J. L. Webb Oratorical Contest, in which Mays believes King was a winner for at least two years.⁴⁷

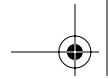
King's Morehouse days were marked by three especially significant developments:

1. He acquired a keen awareness of, and began an intellectual and pragmatic quest for, causes and remedies of the plight of the masses.
2. He decided to become a minister.
3. He preached his first sermon.

Quest for causes. During his early years in college, in addition to wanting at one time to be a physician and later a lawyer, King was a sociology major. He accumulated a commendable classroom record. Yet as a student of sociology, he recognized the need for more than mere textbook knowledge; thus between semesters he sought jobs that would expose him to conditions of the masses. Being the son of a prominent Negro clergyman and civic leader, he could easily have landed a job in any of the numerous black-owned businesses. Instead he chose the work of a common laborer, toiling often at menial, backbreaking jobs with blue-collar people to "learn their plight and feel their feelings."⁴⁸ One summer was spent unloading trains and trucks at the Railway Express Company and another helping in the stockroom at the Southern Spring Bed Mattress Company. Observing that African American males received drastically less pay than white males for identical jobs, he confirmed a theory expounded in Professor Walter Chiver's sociology classes that the love of money is the root not only of evil but indeed of race.⁴⁹

But these were not the only experiences that broadened King's sociological





understanding. When he was a member of Atlanta's integrated Intercollegiate Council, he associated with whites on a basis of substantial equality for the first time and thus developed a more varied view on race. He later remarked concerning this interracial experience, "The wholesome relations we had in this group convinced me that we have many white persons as allies, particularly among the younger generation. I had been ready to resent the whole white race, but as I got to see more white people my resentment was softened and a spirit of cooperation took its place."⁵⁰

As a nineteen-year-old, King also expressed himself via the written word. In an 1948 article, "The Purpose of Education," for the Morehouse campus paper, *Maroon Tiger*; he argued persuasively concerning the kind of relationship one's education should sustain to the masses. After noting that "most" of his fellow students thought education served to provide a "proper instrument of exploitation" so they could perpetuate the plight of the masses, young King asserted that on the contrary, education should equip persons with "noble ends rather than means to an end." He continued:

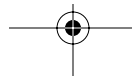
At this point, I often wonder whether or not education is fulfilling its purpose. A great majority of the so-called educated people do not think logically and scientifically. Even the press, the classroom, the platform, and the pulpit in many instances do not give us objective and unbiased truths. To save man from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from fiction.

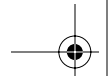
The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.

The late Eugene Talmadge, in my opinion, possessed one of the better minds of Georgia, or even America. Moreover, he wore the Phi Beta Kappa key. By all measuring rods, Mr. Talmadge could think critically and intensively; yet he contends that I am an inferior being. . . .

We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education. The complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate. The broad education will, therefore, transmit to one not only the accumulated knowledge of the race but also the accumulated experience of social living.⁵¹

For King the pattern was set, the formula clear: education + character + a concern





for the masses. Even when he was still a teenager, his sky shone with such noble lodestars.

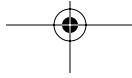
Deciding to become a minister. A decision in favor of gospel ministry as a profession was preceded by a staunch revolt against the religious tradition of African Americans. In spite of a very deep urge in favor of becoming a preacher, King Jr. was repulsed by the emotionalism, hand-clapping, “amening,” “shouting” and widely untrained clergy that generally characterized the black church; these things, he felt, were inharmonious with respectable intellectuality and relevant sociology.

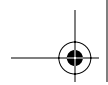
Historian Carter G. Woodson’s *The History of the Negro Church* examines the probable roots of uneducated Negro ministry. During pre-Civil War days (1830-1860), African American ministers were generally deemed incapable of the mental development of whites. Barred from most theological seminaries in the North, few were given opportunity to complete a formal discipline preparatory to the parish; consequently, many Negro preachers began capitalizing on and taking questionable pride in their predicament. “Preaching to his congregation, the ignorant minister would often boast of having not rubbed his head against the college walls, whereupon the congregation would respond: ‘Amen.’ Sometimes one would say: ‘I did not write out my sermon.’ With equal fervor the audience would cry out: ‘Praise ye the Lord.’”⁵²

King admitted his trepidation and apprehension regarding the ministry: “I had doubts that religion was intellectually respectable, I revolted against the emotionalism of Negro religion, the shouting and the stamping. I didn’t understand it and it embarrassed me.”⁵³

His initial biographer, Reddick, describes Ebenezer Baptist as once containing many of these elements, for it “was essentially a congregation of working class people . . . thoroughly familiar with the high charge of emotion—the shouting and the beautiful but full-throated singing—and the general direct behavior of the evangelical denominations to which the majority of Negroes of America belong.”⁵⁴ A person very familiar with Ebenezer and its leadership confided that once it indeed was predominantly the typical, emotionally charged “happy” congregation, but the arrival of King Jr., as associate pastor brought a more well-rounded appeal, a greater balance of emotionalism and intellectualism, fundamentalism and liberalism, working-class people and professionals.⁵⁵

King’s revulsion against the ministry had been evoked, however, not merely by the extrinsic forms of black worship. He was convinced that emotionally





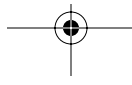
charged worship simply had little, if any, relevance to the real problems and needs of the Negro masses.

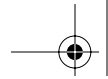
Morehouse College, however, had on its faculty several intelligent, seminary-trained clergymen, among whom were Benjamin E. Mays (the president) and George D. Kelsey (then chairman of the Religion Department and later professor of ethics at Drew University). And foremost among full-time pastor-preacher models who mirrored the ideal was Gardner C. Taylor of Brooklyn's Concord Baptist Church. King caught the brilliant reflection and concluded that what he conceived as a respectable ministry was indeed possible. In Mays and Kelsey he saw that "religion could be intellectually acceptable as well as emotionally satisfying."⁵⁶

Eventually, while still at Morehouse, King concluded that ministry provided the only framework in which he could properly position his growing concept of responsibility to his social milieu. Thus in his senior year, in 1947, King answered the sacred summons and decided to enter the ministerial profession. When I asked Mays why he thought King decided to ascend the podium of preaching, he replied that he believes King received "a 'call,' that inner urge which compels one to do this rather than that."⁵⁷ Years after accepting the inner challenge to ministerial service, King gave the following statement regarding this "call":

My call to the ministry was neither dramatic nor spectacular. It came neither by some miraculous vision nor by some blinding light experience on the road of life. Moreover, it was a response to an inner urge that gradually came upon me. This urge expressed itself in a desire to serve God and humanity, and the feeling that my talent and my commitment could best be expressed through the ministry. At first I planned to be a physician; then I turned my attention in the direction of law. But as I passed through the preparation stages of these two professions, I still felt within that undying urge to serve God and humanity through the ministry. During my senior year in college I finally decided to accept the challenge to enter the ministry. I came to see that God had placed a responsibility upon my shoulders and the more I tried to escape it the more frustrated I would become. A few months after preaching my first sermon I entered theological seminary.⁵⁸

The first sermon. Upon informing his pleased parents of the decision to enter the ministerial ranks, young Martin was permitted, perhaps even directed, by his pastor-father to preach a trial sermon. Years later his father remarked that "he started giving the sermon—I don't remember the subject—in the first unit of the church





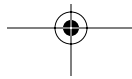
and the crowds kept coming, and we had to move to the main auditorium.”⁵⁹ Satisfied not only with Martin’s decision but also with the evidence of ability conveyed by the sermon, the father returned home that night and thanked God. Later in the same year, the son was ordained to the gospel ministry and appointed assistant to his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

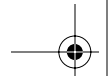
Crozer Theological Seminary. In June 1948, Martin Luther King Jr., nineteen years old, graduated from Morehouse with a bachelor of arts degree. The fall of the same year found the young Atlantan in the North—Chester, Pennsylvania—matriculating at Crozer Theological Seminary, to which, because of promise as both a student and minister, he had been given a scholarship. Crozer at that time was among the top ten theological schools in the United States.

The change from college to seminary scene rather paralleled in time a change in the spirit and trend of the world. World War II, concluded two years prior, did not leave the world unchanged; it discharged forces that began disrupting racial strata. In Asia, Africa and America, people of color were now expressing concern about world conditions and making significant overtures toward more racially integrated societies.

During this era of flux and change, King, mature and intelligent beyond his years, sensed more and more the emerging spirit of assertiveness among the world’s colored peoples. Asa Philip Randolph (an African-American labor leader, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the foremost mass protest organizer at that time) threatened in 1947-1948 to get under way a civil disobedience movement protesting segregation in the U.S. Army.⁶⁰ The threat stirred thousands of Negro collegians. *Newsweek* magazine reported that of 2,200 Negro college youth polled on twenty-six campuses by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 1,619, or 71 percent, indicated that they favored Randolph’s proposal for resisting the draft under the segregation policy of the time.⁶¹ At the very time King was registering at Crozer, a conflagration of contention swept over the United States with regard to an uphill battle for “strong” civil rights legislation being waged by President Harry S. Truman and the Progressive Party.⁶²

These developments did not go unnoticed by the young seminary student, who found permissible pride in the expanding ethos of the Negro. What he would later term the zeitgeist stirring in the womb of time was even then, perhaps, preparing him to stand at the crossroads of outdated traditionalism and a new outlook regarding the Negro’s place in the modern world.⁶³



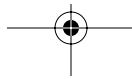


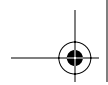
In the meantime King pursued his studies. Three years of professional discipline at Crozer consisted of history and criticism of the Bible, church history, the lives and works of the major prophets, psychology of religion, ethics, social philosophy, church administration and homiletics. Morton S. Enslin, a New Testament professor for whom King had the greatest respect, later said the following about King as an aspiring student of theology:

When I first met and observed Martin both in my classroom and in my home (he dined in my house several times), I saw that he was always a perfect gentleman and knew that he was marked for the sword belt [he was destined to succeed]; he was going to be someone, not a private but an officer in the rank. He was a smooth boy and knew the world was round.⁶⁴

King's homiletics and preaching teacher, Professor Robert E. Keighton, described the curriculum as covering four areas: (1) sermon preparation, (2) practice preaching (before classmates), (3) preaching problems and (4) preaching in public (for seniors).⁶⁵ According to Keighton, no textbook was used in the course. He well remembered King but hastened to add in my interview with him that he recalled nothing especially outstanding about King as a young preacher and had no particularly high esteem for his preaching during his leadership in the civil rights movement. Keeping his comments on his former student rather terse, the former professor labeled King a "product of his environment," a possible "opportunist." Keighton would not elaborate except to say that he felt King preached only to those who agree with him. I was not permitted to probe the uncomplimentary comments; nevertheless, I did notice that in all of the published works on Martin Luther King Jr., lists of eminent and influential teachers of his seminary and graduate school days do not include his homiletics professor.

Because King very well knew that serious social problems existed in the world generally and in the United States particularly, he began reading furiously at Crozer in "a serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil."⁶⁶ The reading list took him on excursions with philosophers Plato, Aristotle, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke; existentialists Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Tillich, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger; social theorists Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Marx, G. W. F. Hegel, Walter Rauschenbusch and Mohandas Gandhi. He reread Henry David Thoreau. Theological concepts exerting the most relevant influence on King will be reviewed in chapter six.



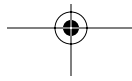


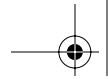
While King's academic performance at Morehouse (1944-1948) had been commendable, his three years (1948-1951) at the racially integrated Crozer Seminary were nothing short of fantastic. So popular was he that he was elected president of the student government. According to Stephen Oates, his activities included also an experience of interracial dating that was sufficiently serious to speak of love and possible marriage.⁶⁷ He received the Plafker Award for most outstanding student and was also senior class president. Graduating as valedictorian with an A average, he received his bachelor of divinity (B.D., the professional seminary degree now known as M.Div. or master of divinity, as changed by the Association of Theological Schools) degree in June 1951. He was awarded the Lewis Crozer Fellowship (\$1,200) to register at the graduate school of his choice for doctoral studies. Sankey L. Blanton, president of Crozer, would write to King upon his graduation, "I regard you as one of the most promising students I have met."⁶⁸

Boston University. Impervious to arguments that he would end up "overeducated" for pastoring a lower- or middle-class congregation, King had applied to at least two graduate schools of theology: Edinburgh University (Scotland) and Boston University. Edinburgh responded that his transcripts were of "sufficiently high quality" to admit him to the postgraduate school in 1951.⁶⁹ He headed instead for Boston University, a center for "personalism," a philosophical concept emphasizing the value of the human personality. Personalism, treated in more detail in chapter six, would later be expressed in many of King's sermons. His intellectual pursuit begun at Morehouse and accelerated at Crozer gained momentum at Boston. Unstinted credit goes particularly to Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf, two foremost exponents of personalism, or personal idealism, for stimulating his thinking at Boston.

DeWolf, at one time chairman of the systematics department, informed me that of all the doctoral students he had served as major adviser at Boston University (some fifty), he rated King among the top half-dozen; he proudly noted that King was one of only two of his students who completed the Ph.D. requirements within three years. The former Boston professor described his former pupil 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."⁷⁰

King's academic ability did not come to the notice only of those who taught him. While Walter G. Muelder, then dean of the school of theology, did not have him in any classes, he recalled vividly the "serious, mature, brilliant stu-





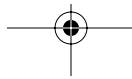
dent in philosophical theology.”⁷¹

Interested mainly in King as a pulpit spokesman, I posed this question to his Boston University tutors: “Is it not possible for a pupil to establish himself as an intelligent student by mastering content materials and accurately answering exam questions in a course without necessarily executing efficient oral communication?” Both S. Paul Schilling (professor of systematic theology and the second reader of King’s doctoral dissertation) and DeWolf answered yes. However, commenting on King’s facility in self-expression, Schilling remarked enthusiastically that he was “direct, very effective, not superfluous.”⁷² Emphasizing further the clarity with which King communicated, even during the defense of his dissertation, Schilling said that when he was talking, a listener never had to interrupt him to ask, “Now what did you mean back there when you said . . . thus and so . . . ?”⁷³ The student of theology did not use jargon or circumlocutions but was always clear. DeWolf added that not only was he “always clear and precise but meticulously systematic and resourceful. His arrangement of ideas, even in ordinary conversation, was superbly organized.”⁷⁴

Only one regret, and that to his student’s credit, did DeWolf mention concerning his relationship with King: “Mr. King manifested such initiative and self-disciplined organization of his work that he was rendered more independent than the average doctoral student and, accordingly, sought little time for the guidance and counsel of his major professor.”⁷⁵

On the subject of organization, it is noteworthy that when King left Boston and took up the pastorate of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (Montgomery), he sent plans of his church organization to two friends for criticism. Both recipients, Major J. Jones (who later became dean of the chapel at Fisk University) and Melvin Watson (faculty at Morehouse College) complimented him on the well-thought-through plans but mildly warned him that his “details” might tend toward “over-organization.”⁷⁶

Similar to an arrangement he had while at Crozer (taking supplemental courses in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania), King took classes in philosophy at Harvard while enrolled at Boston. An influence on his speaking, particularly in group discussion, was the philosophical club he organized with Philip Lenud, a divinity student at Tufts University. Having started out as a weekly get-together of a dozen or so students in King’s apartment soon grew to larger and encouraging proportions.⁷⁷ It apparently was a periodic practice to invite a seminary professor to address the group or lead them in a discussion of a





theological subject, for King wrote a letter to DeWolf on May 15, 1954, thanking him for the interesting lecture he had given to “our Theology Club on last Monday evening.” As a result of DeWolf’s lecture, he said, the club members understood more clearly the “meaning of the Kingdom” and “just how it is to come.”⁷⁸

Even in the midst of a very intensive academic program at Boston University, King took time to practice his public address by preaching on weekends. Cities in which he delivered sermons during his B.U. days included Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chattanooga, Washington, Lansing (Michigan), Methuen (Massachusetts), Montgomery, Philadelphia and Roxbury (Massachusetts).⁷⁹

Successfully passing the oral examination on his dissertation, “A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman,” King was awarded a Ph.D. in systematic theology in June 1955. The same month his major professor, DeWolf, wrote his prize student a personal letter in which he said, “I shall be deeply interested in following both your professional and your personal career. . . . I expect splendid achievements from you and shall always regard you with high appreciation and pride.”⁸⁰ The teacher’s expectation proved prophetic.

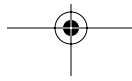
Characterized by a brilliant intellect, broad education, powerful capacity for hard work, enormous willpower and large ambition, King set out to face the world. The seed was indeed germinable; it fell not on stony ground.

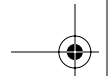
The Fruition: King’s Career

Milieu. In May 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court issued its epochal decision to abolish segregation in public schools.⁸¹ The same month and year marked the genesis of the first church pastorate of Martin Luther King Jr.

For more than half a century segregation had been legalized under the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, affirming the Southern premise that the purpose of the Fourteenth Amendment was not to “enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or a commingling of the two races.”⁸² The Negro had argued that social prejudices could be fought by legislative measures; but the Supreme Court, in the 1896 *Plessy* decision, declared that “if one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane.” Justice John Marshall Harland voiced the lone dissent: “There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law.”⁸³

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court (in a 9-0 vote) dissolved the 1896 deci-



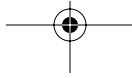


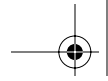
sion by accepting the weighty, well-documented arguments of Thurgood Marshall and colleagues that racially segregated and discriminatory education did have negative effects on the Negro pupil. Justice Harlan's "color-blind note" resounded once more, and the Court ruled: "We cannot turn the clock back to 1868 when the [Fourteenth] Amendment was adopted, or even to 1896 when *Plessy vs. Ferguson* was written. . . . We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."⁸⁴

Marriage. In 1953, while still a resident student at Boston University, King had married the beautiful and talented Coretta Scott, at that time a student at the New England Conservatory of Music. Born and reared in Heiberger, Alabama, Coretta was the second of three children in the household of Obadiah and Bernie McMurry Scott. Her ancestors had owned land in the area since the Civil War. To the union of Martin and Coretta would be born four children: Yolanda, Martin III, Dexter Scott and Bernice. The summer of 1954 witnessed two milestones in the young couple's lives: Coretta graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music, and her husband passed his preliminary examinations at Boston.

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Off to the South they went to take up duties at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The pastorate had been officially accepted the preceding spring predicated on three considerations: (1) that the parsonage be completely furnished, (2) that King be granted an allowance of time to complete his work at Boston University, coming to Dexter as full pastor not later than September 1, 1954 (in the meantime he would fill the pulpit at least once or twice per month, expecting Dexter to defray expenses in his commuting from Boston to Montgomery), and (3) that the proposed salary (\$4,200 per year) be increased as the church progressed.⁸⁵

Why did Martin and Coretta King go to the deep South to pastor a church? What led to the decision? Whatever Martin lacked upon completion of his residence requirements at B.U., it was certainly not opportunities for employment. In addition to at least two from Northern churches and the same number from the South, he had been offered a teaching position, a deanship and an administrative appointment in three colleges.⁸⁶ He was ambitious for a minister-teacher career—inspired by the course of his longtime idol, Benjamin E. Mays, then president of Morehouse College. But good judgment suggested that he spend time pastoring before accepting a teaching post in the academic world. Coretta agreed but favored the Northern pulpits. Wouldn't moving to the South curtail her musical





career and stifle opportunities for further study and cultural outlets? The South, with its race problems, held no enchantment. Nevertheless, King argued passionately for the hard and narrow path of duty.⁸⁷ To the Southland they decided to go.

Dexter was King's preference by virtue of certain advantages. Besides including upper-income parishioners, many of them professionals from Alabama State College (the state-sponsored institution for African Americans), Dexter Avenue Baptist Church was rather "intellectual" and discountenanced "emotionalism" and excessive "amening"—thus promising a more ideal milieu for a young, sensitive and disciplined preacher. King had already "taken the temperature and checked the pulse of Dexter" when, in January 1954, he delivered his trial sermon.⁸⁸ He was satisfied; so was the congregation.

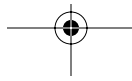
Five years later, during a farewell "This Is Your Life" program honoring King as he prepared to take up his new pastorate in Atlanta, the narrator of the program described the attitudes surrounding the initial reception of their pastor:

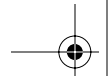
He was received kindly by Dexter members but not without mixed emotions. Some were impressed by the pending Ph.D. degree, others were dismayed by his youth [then twenty-five years old]. In spite of some skepticism and mixed emotions, Dexter's members were committed to give their new pastor their best in the spiritual hope that this would elicit from him his best and that in due time he would obtain the stature of greatness. In one respect we were in error, for long before he was "due" as we had envisioned the time table, he had exceeded the greatness much beyond the anticipation of his most devoted admirers.⁸⁹

The narrator then paid implicit tribute to King's facility in pulpit oratory when he referred to how a certain member of the pulpit committee of Dexter, during the process of selecting the new minister, had been strongly advised to delay any recommendation until the church had "heard the young M. L. King."⁹⁰

It has been reported that one woman felt that the twenty-five-year-old cleric looked kind of lost on the platform without his mother. His first sermon at Dexter was entitled "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life"—love of self, love of neighbors and love of God—auguring well the overall scope of his future. Little did the Dexter church members suspect that this sermon would be later adapted for world audiences.

Very soon, to be sure, word got around, and the Dexter pastor quickly gained the reputation of being an extraordinary preacher. Invitations to preach on special days in other churches became common. Just after one such engagement, the elder Martin Luther King wrote the following fatherly commendation and advice





to the up-and-coming clergyman:

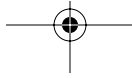
Alexander called me yesterday just to tell me about how you swept them at Friendship Sunday. Every way I turn people are congratulating me for you. You see, young man, you are becoming popular. As I told you, you must be much in prayer. Persons like yourself are the ones the devil turns all of his forces loose to destroy.⁹¹

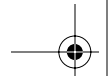
What plans would the young pastor outline for his first parish? What nuances of thought stirred his vision? King later reflected on those early days:

The first few weeks in the autumn of 1954 were spent formulating a program that would be meaningful to this particular congregation. I was anxious to change the impression in the community that Dexter was a sort of silk-stocking catering only to a certain class. Often it was referred to as the “big folks’ church.” Revolting against this idea, I was convinced that worship at its best is a social experience with people of all levels of life coming together to realize their oneness and unity under God. Whenever the church, consciously or unconsciously, caters to one class it loses the spiritual force of the “whosoever will, let him come” doctrine, and is in danger of becoming little more than a social club with a thin veneer of religiosity.⁹²

There was time, moreover, for manifest interest in the larger community of the city. Locked in racial segregation’s iron grasp, Montgomery was marked by a typical sociopoliticoeconomic gulf between its seventy thousand Caucasians (median income \$1,730) and fifty thousand African Americans (median income \$970). While 94 percent of the white families had flush toilets inside their homes, only 31 percent of Negroes enjoyed such facilities. In the early pages of *Stride Toward Freedom* King provides quite a graphic picture of the status of the Montgomery environment: racially segregated schools, segregated public transportation, segregated professional organizations (physicians, lawyers, teachers and the like), segregated ministerial alliance, segregated school of higher learning (Alabama State College, the largest college in the city). Of the thirty thousand Negroes of voting age in Montgomery, he bemoaned that only about two thousand were registered.

King’s concern for these kinds of problems in Montgomery revealed itself in his organizing his church’s Social and Political Action Committee, which worked to keep the congregation intelligently informed of social, political and economic issues and to keep before them the importance of the NAACP and the necessity of being registered voters. Before state and national elections it sponsored forums and mass meetings to discuss the major issues. King himself became a very





active member of the local branch of the NAACP, raised money in his church and delivered several speeches for the organization.

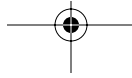
The pulpit at Dexter will be long remembered for its having been occupied by one who led Montgomery's monumental bus boycott, the episode that Louis Lomax views as the "first major battle" of the Negro revolt.⁹³ Ironically, Dexter is less than one hundred yards from the Alabama State Capitol, near which in 1861 Jefferson Davis, the Confederacy's new president, was introduced with these words: "The man and the hour have met." In mid-1952, Montgomery and the world would witness the converging of a new man and a new hour.

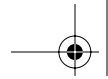
The career of Martin Luther King Jr. was catapulted into national and international attention when he led a bus boycott prompted on December 1, 1955, when an African American woman, Rosa Parks, refused to move back on a crowded city bus to let a white passenger have her seat. The bus driver had her arrested, the Negro community reacted, the boycott began and lasted for one year until the Supreme Court affirmed the decision of a special three-judge U.S. district court, ruling unconstitutional the Alabama state and local segregation laws on buses.

Fifty thousand African American citizens of Montgomery—ministers, physicians, professors, porters, maids, laborers, housewives and others—shed all claims of rank, class or creed to rally under the leadership and direction of the Montgomery Improvement Association. The MIA elected as its president the youthful preacher Martin Luther King Jr. Among other leaders were E. D. Dixon, treasurer; Fred D. Gray, attorney; and the Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, minister of the First Baptist Church, Montgomery, who continued throughout the ensuing King-led national civil rights movement to serve as King's "righthand man," counselor and friend. King often seriocomically referred to Abernathy as "my dearest friend and cell mate."⁹⁴

Providing some three hundred automobiles for regular transportation from forty-six pickup stations, the MIA leased space in buildings to receive additional complaints and requests from citizens and kept the community informed on developments and strategy. For mass meetings it used the facilities of various churches on a rotation plan; in these gatherings the people could communicate and express themselves. Montgomery African Americans exemplified the crystallization of a racial self and proved effective opponents of the white city bureaucracy. The *Nation* described the massive front as having "the nature of a miracle, something that has never happened before in the history of the South."⁹⁵

In putting together his first address as president of the MIA, on December 5,





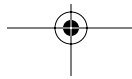
1955, King noted a problem that would perpetually challenge his public speaking on civil rights: how could he make a presentation that would be militant enough to arouse African Americans to positive action yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds?⁹⁶ He decided to face the challenge head on by attempting to combine two apparent irreconcilables: the militant and the moderate forces.

His message that evening at MIA's first mass meeting did not contain any explicit references to the works of Hegel, Rauschenbusch or even Gandhi. He did, however, quote Jesus Christ and Booker T. Washington:

Our method will be that of persuasion, not coercion. We will only say to the people, "Let your conscience be your guide." . . . Love must be our regulating ideal. Once again we must hear the words of Jesus echoing across the centuries: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you." If we fail to do this our protest will end up as a meaningless drama on the stage of history, and its memory will be shrouded with the ugly garments of shame. In spite of the treatment that we have confronted we must not become bitter, and end up hating our white brothers. As Booker T. Washington said, "Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him." . . . If you will protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, "There lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization." This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility.⁹⁷

Since love and forgiveness, Siamese twins of passive resistance, were conspicuous themes of King's actions during the Montgomery movement, it is quite easy to assume that Gandhism was always at the fore. Not exactly. Note King's reaction to the first bombing of his home, January 30, 1956, which threatened the lives of his wife and baby. Although he had spoken forcefully and persuasively on love and forgiveness at a mass meeting that same evening, the demands of husbandhood and fatherhood brought him to feel a need for self-defense. The next day found him in the sheriff's office applying for a gun permit. He was ultimately denied the permit but by then had come to the conviction that that means of self-defense was not the way.⁹⁸ Although his home was bombed three times in all, his self-defense would forever be "the weapon of nonviolence."⁹⁹

In his first major interviews—one with editor Robert E. Johnson of *Jet*, the other with reporter Tom Johnson of the *Montgomery Advertiser*—King made no mention of Mahatma Gandhi. To Tom Johnson, he pinpointed the "social





gospel” as his chief motivation:

Besides the religious philosophers, King was particularly interested in the German philosophers Kant and Hegel. The latter, his favorite, fathered the “dialectical process” which holds that change is the cardinal principle of life and that in every stage of things there is a contradiction which only the “strife of opposites” can resolve.¹⁰⁰

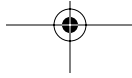
Gandhism’s avenue into the protest movement apparently came from a Southern white librarian named Juliette Morgan, who noted in a letter to the *Montgomery Advertiser* that similarities existed between the Montgomery protest and Gandhi’s passive resistance. MIA leaders, already headed in this direction, capitalized on the idea and thereafter frequently referred to Gandhi as an authority, particularly in their appeals for restraint. Northern and European reporters further emphasized the connection.¹⁰¹

This is not to say, though, that King was unfamiliar with the philosophy of Gandhi. As a student at Crozer he had read and reread several books on the Indian protest leader. Nevertheless, Gandhi’s thought occupied no overtly conscious position in MIA’s initial strategy. (A closer look into the first formal contact of King with the techniques of Mahatma Gandhi will be found in chapter six under “Thematic Sources.”)

King was a man of deep inner strength. If any one point marked the moment of conversion from a mere pastor to a minister with illimitable inner resources, it was probably one night in 1956. Pressured by the claims of leadership, engulfed by the omnipresent possibility of sudden violent death, forced to shoulder immense responsibility, King sat dejectedly in his kitchen and told God he could go no further alone. His heart overflowed: “I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right, but now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”¹⁰²

What resulted from that prayer of relinquishment? Did God answer the petitioning pastor? “At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: ‘Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.”¹⁰³

And face almost anything he did, including twenty-three arrests between January 26, 1956, and June 11, 1964, and a near-fatal stabbing by a deranged woman





in Harlem on September 20, 1958, while he was autographing his first published book, *Stride Toward Freedom*.

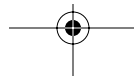
By 1957 King was “one of America’s most sought after speakers and his name was known in almost every corner of America.”¹⁰⁴ In that one year he delivered 208 addresses and traveled some 780,000 miles. James L. Hicks of New York City’s *Amsterdam News* singled out the Prayer Pilgrimage to the Lincoln Memorial, May 17, 1957, as moving King beyond being a nationally and internationally known preacher to being the number-one spokesman for the Negro.¹⁰⁵ Bellowing “Give us the ballot” as his theme, he electrified a crowd of twenty-five thousand: “Give us the ballot, and we will transform the salient misdeeds of bloodthirsty mobs into the abiding good deeds of orderly citizens. Give us the ballot . . .”¹⁰⁶ According to Hicks, King “emerged from the Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington as the No. 1 leader of 16 million Negroes. . . . At this point in his career, they will follow him anywhere.”¹⁰⁷ He had been first quoted in *Time*, the leading news-magazine, on March 5, 1956; by February 18, 1957, *Time* ran a cover story on the Baptist preacher. It would not be the last.

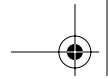
Perhaps for half a century, since the time of Booker T. Washington, African Americans had been looking for a leader. Some now began to mark the beginning of a new era with the emergence of Dr. King.¹⁰⁸ As King’s image loomed on the horizon, Negroes en masse were confronting him with the hopeful query: Art thou he who should come or should we look for another?

From Montgomery to Ebenezer and the SCLC. Willing to serve in any honorable way available, in addition to pastoring Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and chairing MIA, King accepted the presidency of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC; formerly the Southern Conference on Transportation and Non-violent Integration). The organization was founded January 10-11, 1957, and upon accepting the presidency, King himself became an institution.

On Sunday, November 29, 1959, congregants at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church would hear a saddening announcement. Because of mounting and broadening responsibilities, which King named as his pastorate, presidency of the MIA, presidency of the SCLC, extensive speaking appointments, daily office chores and “the general strain of being known,” he made known a “painful decision”: “I would like to submit my resignation as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to become effective on the fourth Sunday in January.”¹⁰⁹

An associate pastorate with his father, the Rev. M. L. King Sr. of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, would not require nearly as many pastoral responsibil-



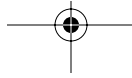


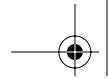
ities as the pastorate at Dexter. Consequently, he would have more time for the broader universe of the SCLC and the myriad speaking engagements. By 1963 he bore the reputation of being “the most powerful Negro leader in America.”¹¹⁰ Salaried at one dollar a year from SCLC and \$6,000 from Ebenezer Baptist Church, King received most of his income from speaking fees, gifts, books and magazine articles. In 1958 he reported a total income of \$25,348, over twice as much as the \$10,000 later published by *Time*.

The SCLC was able to boast a growth from a nucleus of five workers and a budget of \$63,000 in 1960 to a staff of forty and a budget of \$800,000 in 1963. As the generally proclaimed number-one African American leader in America, King brought prestige to the SCLC, thus rendering the organization a strong rival of, and cooperator with, the other major civil rights groups, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). A spread in *Time* (June 28, 1963, p. 16) presented the basic dogma and emphasis of each of these “mainline” civil rights organizations along with a photograph of each leader: Roy Wilkins (NAACP), Whitney M. Young Jr. (NUL), Floyd B. McKissick (CORE) and Stokely Carmichael (SNCC).

It should be noted that by spring 1966 two of these organizations (CORE and SNCC) had changed leaders, revised their attitudes on nonviolence and taken up a new rallying cry of “black power,” the precise definition of which was somewhat elusive. Because of its connotations, the “black power” slogan was rejected by both the SCLC and the NAACP. An updated one-page spread on civil rights movements by *U.S. News & World Report* (July 28, 1966, p. 33) included three additional groups: the “Black Muslims” led by Elijah Muhammad, the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) led by Robert Franklin Williams and the Deacons for Defense and Justice led by Charlie Sims.

With the dynamic thrust of Wyatt Tee Walker, assistant to King and executive director of SCLC, the organization moved into the very fore of the civil rights struggle. Others joining the SCLC team included Ralph D. Abernathy (who also moved from Montgomery and took a church in Atlanta), Andrew J. Young (who in 1964 succeeded Walker as executive director), James Bevel, Dorothy Cotton, James Lawson, Fred Shuttlesworth and later, through the Operation Breadbasket arm, Jesse Jackson. With major civil rights campaigns in cities such as Albany, Georgia; Selma and Birmingham, Alabama; and Chicago, and the March on Washington, King spent a great amount of time in airplanes and hotels, at ban-





quets and receptions, on lecture platforms and behind pulpits. Weekly he traveled three to four thousand miles, and each twenty-four-hour period in a major city may well have included two to three formal addresses, a press conference, and several interviews with reporters from radio, television and print media.¹¹¹

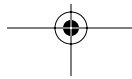
Reese Cleghorn wrote of this private citizen during the much-publicized Birmingham civil rights campaign in 1963:

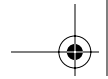
King's position in the rights movement unquestionably is enhanced by the fact that he has the ear of the President and, for that matter, of figures around the world. . . . Not only is he on speaking terms with African leaders; to an extent few white Americans appreciate, his name is known and revered throughout much of the world.¹¹²

During the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration, King conferred with the president and with vice president Richard Nixon; later he apparently had an even closer relationship with President John F. Kennedy. He was one of the twelve hundred invited VIPs who attended the Kennedy funeral in St. Matthew's Cathedral, Washington, D.C. Lyndon Baines Johnson, successor to Kennedy, "summoned him almost immediately to the White House to confer on the change of administration."¹¹³ The M. L. King Jr. Collection of Papers at the Boston University Library and Martin Luther King Jr., Center for Social Change contains letters regarding the civil rights movement to King from President Harry S. Truman, President Eisenhower, Vice President Nixon, Senator John F. Kennedy (then a declared candidate for the U.S. presidency), Attorney General Robert Kennedy and President Johnson. Dr. and Mrs. King were invited guests of President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya (they did not go to Kenya, however, because of the transition following President Kennedy's assassination which necessitated King's remaining in the United States) and of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India.

How did King compare in popularity and effectiveness with other Negro leaders? *Newsweek* conducted a poll among "rank and file" African Americans in twenty-five cities and among one hundred selected Negro "leaders" to gain a reading on how African Americans would rank their own people in the civil rights endeavor. Of the fourteen Negroes receiving significant ratings, King ranked number one with an 80 percent "favorable" rating from the "rank and file" and 95 percent "favorable" from leaders.¹¹⁴

Although there have been many influential African American leaders, only King received the distinctive honor of being named Man of the Year by *Time*





(January 3, 1964) and later had a national holiday established in his name by Congress. Regarding Man of the Year, not only was King the first African American so honored but also only the third religious leader (Mohandas K. Gandhi in 1932 and Pope John XXIII in 1962 were the first). The award that unequivocally made him a truly worldwide figure and international preacher was the Nobel Peace Prize of 1964. The thirty-five-year-old King was “the twelfth American, and the youngest person ever, to be so honored.”¹⁵

At thirty-nine, however, he became the unfortunate victim of an assassin’s bullet in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968, a day of infamy on the American sociopolitical scene—a glaringly heinous trend of murdering its young, powerful leaders, including the likes of President John F. Kennedy at forty-six years of age (1963) and Senator Robert F. Kennedy at forty-three in June of 1968, just two months after the Nobel Prize winning preacher’s death.

Martin Luther King Jr. was “a man who . . . earned fame with speeches.”¹⁶ The flower of his pulpit ministry blossomed luxuriantly and, in myriad ways because of his enduring influence on modern pulpits and platforms, continues to bloom.

