

Chloe Diaz

Dr. Walker Gonzalez

African American Literature

December 16, 2018

Martin Luther King Jr.: The Ideal Medieval Preacher

While King is mostly known for his “I have a Dream” speech and his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” his other sermons are worthy of admiration and study--despite his misgivings about writing them down and publishing them in *Strength of Love*. In his preface, King stated:

“I have been rather reluctant to have a volume of sermons printed. My misgivings have grown out of the fact that a sermon is not an essay to be read but a discourse to be heard. It should be a convincing appeal to a listening congregation. Therefore, a sermon is directed toward a listening ear rather than a reading eye. While I have tried to to rewrite sermons for the eye, I am convinced that this venture could never be entirely successful” (xiv).

Niles Lyndrey said that in the black church, sermons were not meant to be read (5). There is no denying that when King delivered his sermons, there was an amplification to his writings but there were two accomplishments that he accomplished by publishing his works. First, his message would grant access to a larger audience. Second, he created a paper trail with his exact words--generations following didn't have to rely on an oral tradition **to keep close to King's words**. Wesley T. Mott said that the power of King's sermons came from three rhetorical traits, the “negro preaching tradition, political timing and polemical skill, and his literary ability” (412). These traits relate to guidelines that were set during the Middle Ages in a manual titled *The*

*Form of Preaching (Forma Praedicandi)*. The formula of King's sermons can be traced back to his mentors, Harry Fosdick, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the black church. Ultimately, however the roots go back further than slavery or the birth of the United States of America.

While King himself does not mention Basevorn as an influence on him, it is clear from a study of two sermons in *Strength to Love* that King was, whether consciously or unconsciously, influenced by medieval rhetoric, most particularly Robert of Basevorn. If we take a closer look at Basevorn's manual, we can see that many of his forms transcended through time and had a major influence on Martin Luther King. In this essay, I will look at two of the sermons from Martin Luther King Jr.'s book *Strength to Love*: "Love is Action" and "Paul's Letter to American Christians".

### ***The Form of Preaching (Forma Praedicandi)***

Robert of Basevorn wrote the *The Form of Preaching (Forma Praedicandi)* in the 14th century and that is pretty much what we know about Robert himself (Murphy 111). His linguistic style suggest that he was familiar with the Oxford and Paris university-style sermon or the thematic sermon (112). In the 14th century, there was a revival of the scholastic method influenced by the Aristotelian logical method. Students were presented with a theme (subject) that required a solution. There were three steps; "proposal of a theme, discourse proposing a solution to the problem, and rhetor's solution and comments" (39). These ideas transferred to Christian sermons that Robert of Basevorn organized in 50 chapters. Before *The Form of Preaching*, there hadn't been a formal guide for Christian preachers to follow, even with the

influence of St. Augustine (Murphy 113). The manual didn't have much of an influence until the 15th century.

*The Form of Preaching* covered multiple areas of preaching; grammatical form, persuasion, character a preacher, and etc. The manual is broken down in 50 short straight-forward chapters that preachers should consider when preaching. Basevorn used examples from the bible but didn't provide excerpts from sermons. After the last chapter, Basevorn states that chapter 51 is blank. This gives the individual a chapter to make the sermon their own.

In this paper, I will be applying four of the chapters to Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermons. In the first chapter, Basevorn said that the preacher should know how to persuade an audience within an appropriate amount of time a.k.a kairos. Richard Benjamin Crosby discussed King's use of kairos in his last Sunday sermon and knowing how to appeal to their audience. Crosby said the "'Sermon," as I will call it, draws heavily on notions of time, timing, and space" (260). Basevorn and Crosby would agree that kairos isn't just a coincidence but a device that the preacher should be aware of when preaching. Part of King's genius comes from this because he was always prepared, punctual, and chose the right venues for his sermons.

Along with understanding time, the preacher must use rhetorical questions wisely. According to Basevorn, they are not effective because they don't lead to persuasion. During the Middle Ages, preachers were attempting to spread Christianity which most people didn't have an understanding of; questioning an audience would lead to confusion more then persuasion. This is a dated part of the manual that King and other preachers would revise. The audience that King is

preaching to didn't need to understand God or Christ but needed to understand that social injustice is not a part of christian ideology.

In *Strength to Love*, King utilized questions as transitions throughout his text but he offered an answer to each question. When King delivered his sermons, he would pause to allow the audience to consider the question being asked and an opportunity for the audience to respond (call and response), sometimes repeating the question. Taking pauses and repetition were and to this day a part of the Black preaching tradition (Lyndrey 47).

Basevorn offered three qualities that a preacher should hold to have a stronger ethos. The first is that the preacher should have a "purity of life, with respect to anything grievous (make others God and Godlike). Deep down, King was a good man with noble intentions. There is no denying that King was flawed but this doesn't take away from the good that he was trying to do. The second, was a competence of knowledge, "understands the articles of faith, ten commandments, sin vs. non sin.". King was definitely an encyclopedia of knowledge. King attended seminary school and earned his Ph.D. from Boston University. King's knowledge added layers to his sermons making them rich and entertaining to listen to leading to his ability to persuade an audience. The final quality was being an authority from the church. King was an ordained minister of the Baptist Church.

There is the individual themselves and then there is the sermon. The preacher must have a good purpose for their sermon that "edifies" their followers (Murphy 113). King was a master at this. Each of his sermons were carefully thought out and appropriate for the occasion. Niles Lyndrey said, "The now famous, "I have a Dream" has etched its way into the memory, not simply because of logic and reason, but because it aroused the highest emotions and challenged

the best qualities in the listeners to work for an integrated America” (50). This speech and the Montgomery Bus Boycott lead to his notoriety. Notoriety is a goal that preachers should aspire to according to Basevorn in this chapter.

Finally, Basevorn stated that every preacher should find their own method of preaching. King had been formulating his own method since he was in high school. His method would come from his childhood and other scholars. King would follow a set of traditions that predate *The Form of Preaching*.

### **Medieval thought**

It is important not to ignore the origins of *The Form of Preaching*. Most of Medieval rhetorical theory is rooted in Ciceronian rhetoric. The Middle Ages was the rise of Christianity . In the 4th century, Constantine allowed Christianity to be studied (Bizzel 431). This led to the threat of classical rhetoric because the people in power believed that rhetoric was a religion itself. Jerome, one of the prominent founders of the church utilized the ideas of Cicero in his preaching but feared that followers would think he was more of a “Ciceronian” than a Christian (433). But Jerome and later on Augustine found that the devices of rhetoric were key to the persuasion of the church to potential followers.

A thread that can be seen from Robert of Basevorn’s work to Martin Luther King Jr. is the influence of St. Augustine. When we look at Augustine in King’s writing, he talks about him like a colleague which shows the direct influence Augustine had on King. Before Augustine was in the church, he was a student of the law and taught rhetoric (Bizzell and Herzberg 450). During this time, the man who has been canonized as a saint in the Catholic church did not convert to christianity until he was thirty-two. He was in search of a religion that satisfied his intellectual

appetite similar to Cicero's *Hortensius* who was a major influence on Augustine. Augustine would find later that he could apply his knowledge of rhetoric to preaching, which he wrote about in his most famous *On Christian Doctrine*.

He stressed that pastors should know how to interpret scripture and convey the bible amongst a diverse group of people. Augustine focused on interpreting the bible because of its richness in meaning and read like Greek and Roman literature (451). He argued that scripture should be used as proof (Murphy 276). That idea predates Christianity.

Christians over the course of time have attempted to claim that it was a Christian invention (Murphy 269). Murphy said, it was “Christ message that was revolutionary, not his rhetorical process”. Scholars date the act of preaching back to the Jewish tradition. There was a prayer, reading of scripture, and a scriptural discussion (sermon). This is how Jews used the oral tradition which we would later see in the African American church tradition. Black slaves would need to find a means of survival where they could be optimistic to get through life and the spiritual oral tradition would do that (Niles 42). “Christ also introduced a rhetorical element which had never before operated in human history--a direct command to his followers to spread his ideas through his speech” (Murphy 243). Since the beginning of the Christian Church, preaching has been a fundamental responsibility of the followers of Christ.

The three rhetorical methods that Augustine said needed to be in each sermon was that it had to be pleasing, teach a lesson, and a push for action. The preacher needs to be supported by the divine as well as the audience. The scholarship done in the Middle Ages had transcended in time. These influences would inspire other preachers overtime following the tradition of Jesus following the message like Martin Luther King Jr. Before King, there were his direct influences.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Reinhold Niebuhr who would follow Medieval rhetorical methods.

### **Influences**

Harry Emerson Fosdick was considered the “The greatest preacher of all time” by Martin Luther King Jr. (Stanford). When King was in high school, he read many of Fosdick’s writings (including sermons). King was in search for a method that wasn’t like his father’s (King 158). Fosdick was King’s introduction to the social gospel.

When Fosdick was in seminary school, he suffered a nervous breakdown. In his book, *The Meaning of Prayer*, Fosdick said that prayer became an “indispensable” resource for him (I). His work was published in 1915 and an assumption can be made that *The Meaning of Prayer* was one of the pieces from Fosdick that Martin Luther King Jr. read. In the Medieval tradition, prayer always came at the beginning of the sermon. The prayer is a tool meant to put a call out to God to listen. But through the years, prayer felt like it was losing its meaning to Fosdick. He saw a problem with prayer and the way people were handling it. Fosdick said the “Failure in prayer is the loss of religion itself in its inward and dynamic aspect of fellowship with the eternal” (III).

The themes of Fosdick’s sermons were christianity, pacifism, and civil rights which parallel the themes of King’s speeches. Fosdick was one of the first leaders in liberal protestantism and he felt that the church should be a fountain head for social order. Fosdick gained a huge following and influenced people around him being an ideal medieval preacher himself.

To continue his following into the the social gospel, King came upon Walter Rauschenbusch. “In the early 1950s I read Walter Rauschenbusch’s *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, a book that left an indelible imprint on my thinking” (King 158). Rauschenbusch is the social gospel to some but he was not the founder. The social gospel does not start with him but goes back to the civil war (Stanford). Shortly after, there was the rise of capitalism creating a divide in the country. Charles Howard Hopkins said that capitalism was in need of “practical Christianity”. The text that King quotes is Rauschenbusch’s most prominent text where he maps out what has gone wrong in christianity and how to fix it. “We see in the bible what we have been taught to see” (Rauschenbusch 45). In the Middle Ages, the congregation being preached to was illiterate. It was important for the preacher to have an understanding of the bible according to Robert of Basevorn and Rauschenbusch. But what does one do when the words are being twisted? For Walter Rauschenbusch, it was simple--tell the truth and from there, Rauschenbusch began to preach the social gospel.

The social gospel allowed King to think critically about the bible. It was important with the rise of science for “believers” to understand what was being fed to them like previously noted. This was crucial for the civil rights movement because people relied heavily on their church leaders (Chappell 582). Those who favored segregation were justifying that it was God’s will. Those who sided with the civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. treated him like Christ himself. Rufus Lewis said that poor people in Montgomery reacted to King “just like her was their savior...What’s the difference between him and messiah...and I am not really a religious man” “ After Reading Rauschenbusch, I turned to a serious study of the social and

ethical theories of the great philosophers” (King 159). But King needed someone to balance out his liberal gospel similar with Augustine’s love for Cicero and the bible.

Reinhold Niebuhr, was a Christian realist. He was a little less hopeful than the previous influencers included. Niebuhr like many realists believed that the church was an institution meant to give guidance and support but the thought of the church being a place for social change was unrealistic. Niebuhr called Rauschenbusch ideas of love sentiment pietis (5). Jesus Christ cannot provide social ethics. The ethos of Jesus Christ commands and is open to a possible social organization. Realism recognizes their limits. The reality of God means that love and not prudence, is the law of life (67). Law of love orders the church’s doing and love is usually defeated.

All the information above provides a context for King whether directly or indirectly following the methods of Medieval rhetoric, specifically *The Form of Preaching* by Robert of Basevorn. In the next section of the paper, we will be tracing *The Form of Preaching* in two of King’s Sermons starting with “Paul’s Letter to American Christians”.

### **“Paul’s Letter to American Christians”**

“Paul’s Letter to American Christians” was delivered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama on November 4, 1956. 1956 is a crucial year for King, in January, his house was bombed. A month later, King is mentioned in the national press for the first time due to the the Montgomery Bus Boycott on February 27, 1956 (Bulik). In a profile done in the *New York Times* a month later, they said that he was a “soft spoken man with a learning and maturity far beyond his twenty-seven years”. During this time, he received threatening phone calls. King said that he was “possessed by fear”(Garrow 438). One night he

received a call, “Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now, and if you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house” (442). King reacted like anyone who’d receive a call like this, scared but he couldn’t stop what he was doing. That year, he continued to preach at various churches in Alabama. In this sermon, he utilizes Paul.

“St. Paul constantly reminds the new christians of their responsibility, as in corinthians 14:9 where he points out “so likewise you, except you utter by the tongue plain speech, how shall it be known what is said” Paul’s own career demonstrates his full acceptance of the responsibility, for after his conversion he devoted his whole life to the arduous evangelistic travels spelled out in such human detail in the acts of the apostles and his own four major epistles to the new churches” (Murphy 274).

Unlike his other sermons, King starts with a preface rather than a biblical verse. “I would like to share with you an imaginary letter from the pen of the Apostle Paul” (King 145). King said that he attempted to translate the letter but to excuse parts that sound “Kingian”. In the recorded version of this sermon, this part received a small amount of laughter from the audience. Although, this was not one of the parts from Basevorn’s text that I broke down, Basevorn did lay out 22 ornaments to make sermons more entertaining (citation). Having a sense of humor was one of them.

After the preface, King begins to tell the audience what Paul said. “Through your scientific genius you have dwarfed distance and placed time in chains. You have made it possible to to eat breakfast in Paris, France and lunch in New York City” (King 146). A little later he says, “But, America, I wonder whether your moral and spiritual progress has been commensurate

with your scientific progress”. The purpose and theme of this sermon is to consider the modern day progress with science but the lack of social progress in the United States. King was making an attempt to make people think about their actions and communicate what God actually wants which is to work together. The first problem that King points out is the idea of capitalism and how money has created a type of segregation on its own.

In King’s sophomore year, King took a sociology class with Richard Chivers, who was a critic of segregation (Carson 122). Chivers would become his mentor and influence his anti capitalist opinions that we see in “Paul’s Letter to American Christians”.

“But Americans, there is the danger that you will misuse your capitalism. I still contend that the love of money is the root of much evil and may cause a man to become a gross materialist” (King 147).

In this passage, King acknowledges that capitalism has made the United States the most powerful nation in the world due to financial success. King questions through Paul, if that is possible when there is segregation. How is the United States so powerful when there is inequality? Something that seems to bother King (Paul for this matter), is that in American there is a white church and a black church which is problematic for both groups (149). Because both churches are preaching two separate ideas when they are only supposed to be preaching one universal idea. The church is supposed to bring everyone together not separate.

Towards the end of the sermon, he preaches the idea of love, which runs through out his volume of sermons and said Amen at the end (153). King’s use of Medieval rhetorical theory can be seen through out this sermon. There is edification; pointing out the flaws and making people aware, he had a clear knowledge of what was going on in the current political climate like the

supreme court decision on education that he mentioned (150). King himself is an authority figure and following his own actions making this a beautiful sermon.

### **“Love is Action”**

“Love is Action” was written in 1960. We don’t have an exact month for when King composed this sermon because it’s one of the three that he wrote while he was in jail in Georgia when he wrote this sermon<sup>1</sup>. King starts with a verse from Luke 23:34 when Christ was on the cross. “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” after King said that this was “love at its best”(King 31). Jesus forgave the men that were murdering him. King said that Christians need to do that for those who act on evil. Specifically those who are racist but King does not let them off the hook.

In this sermon, King continues to bring up the scripture throughout his sermon. He is making a comparison to Americans with racial injustice to Jesus and the Jews/Roman soldiers putting him to death.

“Yet Jesus taught them that only through a creative love for their enemies could they be children of their Father in heaven and also that love and Forgiveness were absolute necessities for spiritual maturity” (33)

For a medieval sermon he leads by example. He is writing this sermon in jail where he is reflecting on not punishing those who put him there. For one, the police who arrested him were following an order. Second, they were probably racist but racism isn’t a hereditary trait. They were molded that way. King stresses that rather than hating the whole group, it’s a Christians job to follow Jesus’s example. He is promoting persuasion by love. For some, this was inspiring. For

---

<sup>1</sup> The other two sermons were “Love your Enemies” and “Shattered Dreams” (xiii)

others, change wasn't happening soon enough. Later in his sermon, King presents his knowledge of classical rhetoric and comparing the situation at hand.

“Centuries ago a sage named Socrates was forced to drink hemlock. The men who called for his death were not bad men with demonic blood running through their veins. On the contrary, they were sincere and respectable citizens of Greece. They genuinely thought that Socrates was an atheist because his idea of God had a philosophical depth that probed beyond traditional concepts. Not badness but blindness that killed Socrates” (34)

This verse shows that this has been happening throughout time and unfortunately it happened to King later on. King calls out those in both sermons that don't follow the bible the way they are supposed to. Jesus Christ was sent down to promote love and so was King.

That was the point of a preacher in the eyes of Robert of Basevorn. They were supposed to be someone that felt a divine gift, that there was a call from God. King responded to this call and embodied a lot of the principles medieval rhetorical theory. King is a heavily studied theologian in rhetoric and has been anthologized for two pieces but the rest of his work has been rarely studied. A lot of people know who King is but they don't know him either because educators have romanticized him as “Letter for Birmingham Jail” and “I have a dream”. It is important that scholars explore more of his work. King is the ideal Medieval preacher.

## Works Cited

- Miller, Keith D. "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Folk Pulpit." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 78, no. 1, 1991, pp. 120–123. Carson, Clayborne.
- Carson, Clayborne "Martin Luther King Jr.: The Morehouse Years." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 15, 1997, pp. 121–125.
- Garrow, David J. "Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Spirit of Leadership." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 74, no. 2, 1987, pp. 438–447.
- Crosby, Richard Benjamin. "Kairos as God's Time in Martin Luther King Jr.'s Last Sunday Sermon." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2009, pp. 260–280.
- Niles, Lyndrey A. "Rhetorical Characteristics of Traditional Black Preaching." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1984, pp. 41–52. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2784116](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784116).
- Sharma, Mohan Lal. "Martin Luther King: Modern America's Greatest Theologian of Social Action." *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 53, no. 3, 1968, pp. 257–263.
- Chappell, David L. "Religious Revivalism in the Civil Rights Movement." *African American Review*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2002, pp. 581–595. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1512419](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1512419).
- Aiken, John R. "Walter Rauschenbusch and Education for Reform." *Church History*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1967, pp. 456–469
- Piper, Otto A. "Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology." *Journal of Bible and Religion*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1957, pp. 106–111.
- Carson, Clayborne. "Martin Luther King Jr.: The Crozer Seminary Years." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 16, 1997, pp. 123–128.

Miller, Robert M.. Harry Emerson Fosdick : Preacher, Pastor, Prophet, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1985.

Flescher, Andrew. "Love and Justice in Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Christian Realism and Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics of Responsibility: Treading between Pacifism and Just-War Theory." *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2000, pp. 61–82.