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The Content of Our Character -Forty Years After "The Speech"

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Civil rights leaders had called for the March on Washington in order to force the nation to deal with the so-called "race problem." As the event drew to a close, all eyes were on the final speaker. The crowd standing in Washington's sweltering heat waited for the man they knew would be the "closer" of the event.

Most Americans recognized the name, face, and voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. He had appeared on the nation's front pages and news broadcasts, having led major protests and movements in Montgomery, Birmingham, and other cities. And yet, King was an enigma to many white Americans. What would he say?

Interestingly, the most famous words of his speech were not included in his manuscript. King had arrived in Washington the day before and had prepared his speech in a room at the famous Willard Hotel. In *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Speech That Inspired a Nation*, author Drew D. Hansen provides a parallel text of Dr. King's manuscript and his actual words. When he reached the pinnacle of his oratory, King simply departed from his prepared text and launched his speech into history.

"I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream."

Dr. King spoke of a dream "that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood." More personally, "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today."

In the midst of a nation torn by racial strife and social unrest, Dr. King painted an indelible picture of America as it could be and should be. His oratory was soaring, his imagery was vivid, and his cause was right. His cadences, inflections, and biblical allusions gave the speech its memorable structure. His powerful argument gave the speech its moral weight. The speech is as much a part of our national memory as Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Speaking to a generation poised to reject the American dream as a lie, Dr. King challenged them to make it their own. He rejected claims that America could never be reformed or called to its moral senses.

We do well to look back to 1963 and remember the reality. In the South, Jim Crow laws enforced segregation. Separate motels, restaurants, schools, and water fountains marked the moral landscape. In the North, the absence of Jim Crow laws did not mean that the races were integrated. North and South, black and white Americans inhabited different worlds. African-Americans were routinely denied access to accommodations, higher education, and the voting booth.

Those standing on the nation's Mall that day could not have known that years of struggle, frustration, violence, and tragedy lay ahead. Observing America in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, "I do not imagine that the white and black

race will ever live in any country upon an equal footing. But I believe the difficulty to be still greater in the United States than elsewhere.” His words proved an understatement.

Obstructionists attempted to block racial progress at every turn. Some white Americans just could not abide the idea of racial equality and full integration. On the other hand, Stanford University professor Shelby Steele traces how many of the civil rights leaders traded moral consciousness for racial consciousness, and abandoned the vision of racial equality for identity politics.

Still, America is a very different nation now. Racial discrimination is prohibited by law. Statements of prejudice are now socially unthinkable and politically incorrect. Black America can now claim the nation’s Secretary of State and the world’s leading golfer. Poverty still holds many in its grip, but the majority of African-Americans are in the middle class. Nevertheless, much ground remains to be recovered.

Southern conservatives bear a special burden, especially as Christians. I was not yet four years old on August 28, 1963. I have no memory of hearing Dr. King deliver his famous address. A white boy raised in the South, I had not seen any black persons at close hand. I had seen black workers, field hands, and children, but all at a distance. I had no black friends, no black neighbors, and saw no black faces at school or at church. To the best of my knowledge, I attended segregated schools until the fifth grade.

Later, living in a major metropolitan area, I attended integrated middle high schools with hundreds of black students. I came to know black teenagers at school, work, Boy Scouts, and other activities. I considered several of these as friends, but I never really entered their lives. It now dawns on me that I have no idea where they may be living, or what they may be doing.

Now, I know many African-Americans as cherished friends and treasured colleagues. I cannot imagine a world in which this is not normal, nor can our children. But honesty compels me to admit that this is more because my black friends have entered my world, than that I have entered theirs.

Christians must begin with the affirmation that all human beings are equally created in the image of God. But we also realize that we are sinners, and sin is the fundamental problem on the issue of race. Sin is so interwoven in our lives and institutional structures that we often cannot even see it. The only real remedy for the problem of racial prejudice is the transforming power of the Lord Jesus Christ. His atonement for sin is the only cure, and the only real picture of true racial reconciliation is that found in Revelation 7:9-12, where we read of the redeemed people of God as “a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the Lamb.” The Lamb will make us one.

There is much work to do. We struggle in a fallen world until Jesus comes. By God’s grace, we know that real progress is possible and that we are accountable. The church must show the world that the new community of Jesus is called to demonstrate His glory in calling us together.

August 28, 1963 seems like a very long time ago. We still do not know what to do with Martin Luther King, Jr. He was a complex person, and the cracks in his personal character have become more evident over time. We admire his courage and the clarity of his conviction, even as we are troubled by his flirtations with liberal theology. We simply do not know what he may have done or how he would have led, had he not been assassinated in 1968. We cannot fully enter into the mind of any man—much less a man who died nearly four decades ago.

This much is clear. When Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke that day from the Lincoln Memorial, he demonstrated true moral courage and spoke as a prophet. His dream was the right dream. His dream must be our dream. Our response to that dream reveals the true content of our character.

