

The Importance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day

By

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On the evening of April 4, 1968, my college dorm room door swung open. A student stuck his head in my room and with a smile on his face and said, “They got the King!” What a tragedy, I thought. I had no words for him that day. My heart cried out for King, the movement, and our nation. I knew it was not just about King, but about people of worth to God – which is everyone – our nation, and our Christian influence.

I was a first-year student at Mars Hill College (now University) north of Asheville, N.C. There I began to learn how to dialogue on crucial issues of the day with people who had a different background and perspective.

Even though I grew up in places of great diversity – Baltimore and Philadelphia – my daily life centered around the limited diversity of my church community. My father was a pastor, so outside of school and home I was primarily in church. By high school I attended schools of great demographic diversity. My actual classrooms lacked diversity due to segmentation by academic levels. I was a minority. Eighty percent of my classmates were Jewish.

I knew people of diversity during my youth. But they were primarily Baptist people on a common mission with great affirmation for one another. We were colleagues in fulfilling the Great Commission. Conversations lacked a variety of perspectives. I met such colleagues in ministry at places such as Ridgecrest Conference Center in North Carolina.

This was no longer true when I came back to the state of my birth to attend college. On my freshman dormitory hall, differing perspectives on the issues of the day were openly expressed. Often missing was a Christ-like response to them. I engaged in deep dialogue with people who thought differently from what I had learned growing up in a sheltered Baptist environment.

For example, I learned as a child that all people – regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomics, or lifestyle – were persons of worth created in the image of God to live and to love. That did not mean my attitudes and actions were pure and noble toward all people. Like you, I am not perfect. It just meant that was the goal of all attitudes and actions.

Particularly attitudes about race were a surprise to me once I reached college. I found myself thinking, “you mean these people grew up in a Baptist church like I did?” I had heard my grandparents openly express racist perspectives. Every once in a while I heard my parents express culturally ingrained racist perspectives. I even picked up a few myself. Again, I am not perfect.

But the openly racist attitudes I encountered in the mountains of North Carolina from students primarily from the South were a shock. Of course, the same or similar attitudes exist throughout our country. However, in college in 1968 the combination of culture, government, and even religion created a racist mix that could be toxic.

Open debates on a variety of issues took place throughout my dorm. None were more conflictual than the race debates. The student who informed me of the King assassination had advocated for someone to shoot King and end all this foolishness.

Like all the rest of us, Martin Luther King Jr was not perfect. Yet he was spiritually gifted, skilled, and called of God to serve a prophetic role in a crucial time in American history. Regardless of what you may personally think about King or the civil rights movement, it is important to recognize that this movement was long overdue and needed in our country.

When CMBA sponsors Martin Luther King Jr worship celebration days – which we seek to do annually – we are not worshipping King. We are worshipping God and thanking our Lord for raising up such a leader. We are celebrating the progress made in racial and ethnic equality.

We are asking God to forgive us for times when – regardless of our race, ethnicity, socioeconomic standing, educational achievement, or employment position – we think of ourselves more highly than we ought, or when we think of ourselves as better than someone else or a group of people.

We recommit ourselves to ministry in a manner where the unconditional love of God reigns supreme. Where we celebrate equality. Where we are all sinners. Where the ground is level at the cross. Where heaven is a place for all of God's people reconciled in their spiritual relationship through the sacrifice of Jesus the Christ.

We celebrate the importance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day and beg God for forgiveness that we have not been as bold as was this servant of God. Even though the pandemic has forced the cancellation of our worship celebration this year, we still yearn to be bold as God would have us be bold.