

Martin Luther: And Other Essays

Martin Luther King Jr. and His Philosophy on Nonviolent Direct Action

Any number of historic movements in the civil rights struggle have been used to identify Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. - prime mover of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, keynote speaker at the march on Washington, youngest Nobel Peace Prize recipient. However, the single events are far less important than the fact that King, and his policy on non-violent protest, was the dominant force in the civil rights movement during its decade of greatest achievement, from 1957 - 1968.

The first major event of the modern civil rights movement was marked by the 1954 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown vs. The Board Of Education*. The purpose of this was to overturn desegregated schools. However, schools in the south were slow to comply, and many times the attempt to register a black student would result in an eruption of violence. The second event of the Civil Rights movement which has come to be more well known, was the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 (Thomas 2). This instance occurred after a black woman by the name of Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat to a white man, and as a result was arrested. In response, local blacks staged a one- day boycott of the bus system to protest her arrest. King made his first mark at this point by mobilizing the black community during a 382- day boycott of the city's bus lines (a movement that would cost the bus lines roughly 65% of their income). After this instance King overcame numerous arrests, violent harassment, and the bombing of his home. Ultimately, the Supreme Court came to the conclusion that bus segregation as immoral, and declared it unconstitutional (Lee 1).

Being a national hero, and a civil rights figure of rapidly growing importance, King summoned together a group of black leaders in 1957 and began to lay the groundwork for the organization that would come to be known as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). King was elected president of the committee, and soon began to assist other communities in the organization of protest against discrimination. King's method to approaching these protests was one of nonviolence and peaceful resolutions. His philosophy rested upon the notions of equality, structure, direct action, justice and love.

In the 1960s the press sometimes referred to King's nonviolent methods as 'passive resistance'. The 'passive' being derived from the visions of people not striking back when being attacked. King on the other hand, referred to his methods as 'nonviolent resistance' and believed that there were six important points about nonviolent resistance. First, he argued that even though nonviolence may seem to be cowardly, it was not, and it was in fact a methods that did resist. According to King, the nonviolent protester is as passionate as a violent protester and despite the fact that the aggression is not present "his mind and emotions are always active, constantly seeking to persuade the opponent that he/she is mistaken" (Baer 4). Secondly, King believed that the point of nonviolent resistance is not to humiliate the opponent, but rather, to gain his/ her friendship and understanding. The use of boycotts and other methods of non-cooperation were used simply to "awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent" (Baer 4). The result of this was redemption and reconciliation instead of the bitterness and chaos that resulted from violent resistance. The third point that King advanced was that the battle was against the forces of evil, not individuals. The tension was not between the races, but "between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And if there is a victory it will be a victory not merely for fifty thousand Negroes, but a victory of justice and he forces of light." (Thomas 2). Fourth, King believed that nonviolent resistance required the willingness to suffer. One must accept violence without retaliating with violence, and must be willing to go to jail if necessary. King's fifth point about nonviolent resistance was that the "universe was on the side of justice." (Baer 4). Accordingly, people have a cosmic companionship with God, who is on the side of truth (Thomas 1). Kings sixth and final point was central to the method of nonviolent resistance. He believed that the importance of nonviolence rested in the fact that it prevented physical violence and the "internal violence of spirit." (Thomas 1).

As public encounters, nonviolent demonstrations usually involved three separate groups of people : the demonstrators , the store/staff/police that were trying to end the demonstration, and the usually much larger group of bystanders or spectators (

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