

American Council of Christian Churches
76th Annual Convention, October 24-26, 2017
Faith Free Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina
Resolution on Evangelicalism and Martin Luther King, Jr.

While attending Crozer Theological Seminary in 1949, Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) detailed his beliefs on Christianity. He wrote: “doctrines such as a supernatural plan of salvation, the Trinity, the substitutionary theory of the atonement, and the second coming of Christ are all quite promin[e]nt in fundamentalist thinking. Such are the views of the fundamentalist[,] and they reveal that he is oppose[d] to theological adaptation to social and cultural change. He sees a progressive scientific age as a retrogressive spiritual age. Amid change all around he [is] willing to preserve certain ancient ideas even though they are contrary to science.”¹

MLK also stated that the doctrine of the resurrection, “upon which the Easter Faith rests, symbolizes the ultimate Christian conviction: that Christ conquered death. From a literary, historical, and philosophical point of view this doctrine raises many questions. In fact the external evidence for the authenticity of this doctrine is found wanting.” Concerning the virgin birth of Christ, MLK furthermore wrote: “we must admit that the evidence for the tenability of this doctrine is to[o] shallow to convince the objective thinker.”² In the early 1960s, MLK also said, “I do not believe in hell as a place of a literal burning fire.”³ These statements indisputably affirm that MLK was a theological liberal, opposed to the cardinal doctrines of the orthodox, Protestant faith.⁴

The apostle John declared in his Second Epistle that whoever denies these doctrines “hath not God” (v. 9). Therefore, God commanded orthodox believers to “mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 16:17-18).

Since the ecumenical evangelism of the 1950s, however, a number of professed evangelicals have disregarded God’s commands to mark and avoid false teachers. Instead, they have embraced theological liberals like MLK, as if they were believers in Christ. During the 1957 Madison Square Garden crusade, Billy Graham had Rev. King offer a pastoral prayer, giving the impression that MLK was orthodox.⁵ Within the last few years, prominent evangelicals affiliated with The Gospel Coalition (TGC) have downplayed MLK’s unbelief while highlighting socially positive aspects of his legacy, implying that the gospel is not essential for life and godliness. John Piper particularly has written that people should “leave aside [MLK’s] theology and moral flaws”⁶ and “not belabor his sins. The point is to lift up some magnificent things he stood for and some necessary and amazing achievements.”⁷ In an early 2017 article titled, “What Martin Luther King’s Legacy Means for the Church,” TGC’s Russell Moore cited MLK’s religious speeches and declared that “perhaps there is something in our gospel preaching that needs to learn from Dr. King.”⁸ Commenting on an upcoming TGC event titled, “MLK50: Gospel Reflections from the Mountaintop,” Moore also posited that “Dr. King appealed to [a gospel of reconciliation], and it is this gospel that belongs to the church as much right now as it ever has.”⁹ But in neither of Moore’s statements did he explain that MLK’s gospel was actually an unorthodox social gospel, which cannot reconcile any man to God (Eph. 2:13-17, 2 Cor. 5:18-21).

Therefore, the American Council of Christian Churches at its 76th annual convention, October 24-26, 2017, at Faith Free Presbyterian Church in Greenville, SC, resolves to warn Christians, not only of the theological liberalism of MLK, but also of the unbiblical portrayal of him by evangelicals. Orthodox Protestants who commemorate King as a part of gospel ministry while ignoring, downplaying, or recasting his theological liberalism fail to pay heed to the apostle John’s words in verses 10-11 of his Second Epistle: “If there come any unto you, and bring not [the] doctrine [of Christ], receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.” In making disciples of Christ from all nations (Mark 16:15), ministers must not partner with a gospel-denier or invoke his legacy as if he were a true believer. His important contributions to American civil liberties notwithstanding, Rev. King’s example cannot provide “gospel reflections from the mountaintop.”



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¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Sources of Fundamentalism and Liberalism Considered Historically and Psychologically” (essay, Crozer Theological Seminary, 1949, in Stanford University’s The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/sources-fundamentalism-and-liberalism-considered-historically-and>).

² King, “What Experiences of Christians Living in the Early Christian Century Led to the Christian Doctrines of the Divine Sonship of Jesus, the Virgin Birth, and the Bodily Resurrection,” (essay, Crozer Theological Seminary, 1949, in Stanford University’s The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/what-experiences-christians-living-early-christian-century-led-christian>).

³ “What Happened to Hell?” *Ebony*, January 1961, 52.

⁴ For a thorough examination of the key differences between orthodoxy and modernism, see J. Gresham Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009, orig. 1923).

⁵ Graham’s 1957 crusade also received sponsorship from other liberals, such as D. Ward Nichols, Henry P. Van Dusen, and Ralph Sockman.

⁶ John Piper, “Martin Luther King Changed My World, and I Am Thankful,” Desiring God Blog (January 21, 2013): <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/martin-luther-king-changed-my-world-and-i-am-thankful>.

⁷ Piper, “Don’t Waste Martin Luther King Weekend,” Desiring God Blog (January 19, 2008): <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/dont-waste-martin-luther-king-weekend>. See also Piper, “How I Process the Moral Failures of My Historical Heroes,” The Gospel Coalition (June 13, 2017): <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-i-process-the-moral-failures-of-my-historical-heroes>. Piper treated Mother Teresa the same way in 1981 when he called her a “servant of God.” Piper, “The Spirit of Joy,” Desiring God Blog (March 3, 1981): <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-spirit-of-joy>. See also the 2016 ACCC “Resolution on New Calvinism.”

⁸ Russell Moore, “What Martin Luther King’s Legacy Means for the Church,” Russell Moore Blog (January 16, 2017): <http://www.russellmoore.com/2017/01/16/martin-luther-kings-legacy-means-church/>.

⁹ Moore quoted in Elizabeth Bristow, “ERLC to host MLK50 event in Memphis on 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s Jr.’s assassination,” The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (April 4, 2017): <http://erlc.com/resource-library/press-releases/erlc-to-host-mlk50-event-in-memphis-on-50th-anniversary-of-martin-luther-king-jr-s-assassination>. As the title of the article notes, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) of the Southern Baptist Convention is also co-hosting the event. Moore is the president of ERLC.