

Martin Luther King: Baptist Preacher and Prophet **March 2009**

(Second in a series of biographical essays in commemoration of the 400 anniversary of the Baptist movement)

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King is best known for his leadership in the Civil Rights movement in the United States beginning in Birmingham in 1954 and ending with his assassination in 1968. Less known are the Christian principles that guided his courageous actions and enlightened his keen mind. For example, many people cite Ghandi as the inspiration for his strategy of non-violent civil disobedience. What they fail to recognize is that Ghandi's inspiration for non-violent civil disobedience was Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus insistence on "turning the other cheek" became an intentional strategy to use love, patience, and forgiveness as a pathway to social reform.

Even more than the influence of Ghandi, was the influence of the Old Testament prophets on King's life. On his tombstone are inscribed the words of the 8th century prophet Amos: "Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). Like Amos, King traveled from his home to pronounce judgment on the nation for its injustice and hypocrisy. While we were fighting wars overseas to liberate people from communism we were segregating our own people because of the color of their skin. In his letter in a Birmingham jail, King wrote about telling his daughter she couldn't go to the new amusement park she had just seen on television because she was a colored person and the park was exclusively for white people. When he told her this King could "see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people." Like Jeremiah, he had to speak out against the injustices he saw even when his proclamations were met by anger and threats against his life. As Jesus said, "Prophets are never accepted in their hometowns." And so it was with King. He was not accepted in his own country, his southern roots, or by his white counterparts in Baptist churches. Darkness does not like to have light expose it.

In the tradition of Moses leading his people out of Egyptian bondage, the Reverend King led his people out of segregation and into fuller life and participation in the American dream. More than the philosophy of Henry David Thoreau, King looked to the Old Testament prophet Moses for inspiration in his wandering through the American wilderness. On the night of April 3, 1968 he preached at a church in Memphis. He was clearly reflecting on his role as the Moses of his people and began to speak about coming to the Promised Land. He knew that Moses wasn't allowed to enter the Promised Land and King also sensed he might not enter freedom with his people. So he concluded his sermon with these words: "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried

about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

The next day Martin Luther King was assassinated while leaving a second floor hotel room in Memphis. He died a martyr for the cause of justice, a Baptist preacher and prophet following in the long line of God's spokesmen who were wounded for the transgressions of the people.