

# Interview with Richard Wayne Wills Sr. on Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Image of God

**PLT: How did you come to this subject?**

**RW:** King's work as a civil rights advocate is well established, however, it was the theological current that undergirded his work that intrigued me most. *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Image of God* was written, therefore, as a result of my desire to understand the relationship between what King thought (theologically) and what King did in response to what he believed to be true regarding God and humanity.

King was one who held to a worldview that was shaped and informed by a Christian faith in search of answers to social dilemma. What did those answers sound like? While King is widely published across many academic disciplines, it was my sense that more needed to be said about King's theological contribution. What was King's theological leaning? How did his theology inform his approach to civil rights? Moreover, how do his theological conclusions contribute to the study and work of the church today?

I sensed that there had to be a theological thread that connected King to the wonderful theological contributions of others while not divorcing him from the rich tradition of freedom struggle that he came to embody. The doctrine of Imago Dei appeared to be that entry point. The theology related to our thinking about what it means to have been created in the image of God dates back to Christianity's founding and beyond. It also served to link King with the historical context of freedom from previous centuries as abolitionists and church rallied in its struggle against slavery and racial oppression. This subject was originally birthed as a dissertation project at the University of Virginia with the very capable advisory assist of Charles Marsh and later converted to book form with Oxford Press.

**PLT: How does the book present a new perspective on Dr. King and his work?**

**RW:** This book offers a rare glimpse of King as theologian and is novel in its perspective in several respects. First and foremost it provides a thorough consideration of the ways in which King carefully arrived at a theological anthropology that was most akin to his hopes for a just and reconciled society. This close reads provides insights into how King reasoned through various theological propositions and arrived at one that could be considered uniquely his own. The book then positions King within a spectrum of theological thinkers in an attempt to compare and contrast his thought with that of other theologians dated from as early as the

Patristic period. Additionally, this work presents King's theological conception as a continuum of the historical debate against slavery and its various remaining vestiges. As such it provides a broad historical context from which one may more fully appreciate King's theological appeal for reconciliation by grounding the language in the soils of western struggle.

While other works identify the various sources and influences that contributed to King's theological thinking, this one includes many of his African American contemporaries, including the voices of Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, Samuel Dewitt Proctor, WEB Dubois, and Adam Clayton Powell. These, among others, provide a sampling of the model/mentors that King looked to and gleaned from as he formulated his theological conclusions and represents an important inclusion of data critical to understanding King's development.

Although King makes little or no reference to their work in his public writings and speeches, his tremendous appreciation for their work and influence is made known via his personal invitations to them while pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Finally, this work becomes unique in its attempt to show how King reconciles and adjusts his optimistic hope for beloved community with the gradual, and at times deferred, march toward the Promised Land. All of this has been framed in a single volume with hopes of establishing the fact that King thought theologically and that his theological anthropology remains worthy of our serious consideration and ongoing conversation.

**PLT: What was your intended reading audience?**

**RW:** I primarily attempted to write this text for my colleagues in the academe and the pulpit. It seemed like a natural inclination inasmuch as King himself embraced and bridged the two venues in ways unimagined prior to his public career and since his death. King apparently saw no dichotomy between the work of the church and the intellectualism of the university. Both served to further the work of the church and his hopes for fuller realizations of social justice. I wrote with the hope that pastors and professors alike would see in this model the kind of common-ground that makes for rich conversation and rewarding collaborations in the community.

It is also written with those beyond the context of the church, yet also created in the image of God, an opportunity to consider King's appeal for community in these troubling and restless days. The implications for his theological anthropology are far reaching and I would hope that text resonates with those other traditions and cultural backgrounds. King appealed to a very diverse audience and I would hope that this work continues to find application and relevance among our 21 st century residents of this worldhouse.

**PLT: Tell us how your experience as a pastor influenced your book.**

**RW:** My experience as a pastor, in fact, had direct bearing on the writing of this book. Having had the humbling experience of serving Dexter Avenue Baptist Church as its senior pastor, I felt obligated to think very deeply and write very honestly about King and his theological legacy. As a pastor, I personally understood the ways in which our theology tends to shape and inform

every facet of ministry. In addition to providing structure and substance to our homiletics, theology guides the length and breadth of the work we deem essential. In a real sense, what we do becomes a byproduct of what we think theologically.

It is at this very point that The Project on Lived Theology continues to remind and challenge us with respect to our need to revisit and rediscover that vibrant relationship. King clearly understood that systematic theology was much more than a graduation requirement. It was, for him, a lens through which he made sense of his relationship to God, others, and his living situation. I could not help but write with the then twenty-five year old pastor in mind, and consider that ways in which King assumed leadership responsibility of what would become the most significant movement for freedom in our modern era. King's impromptu Holt Street address was a speech born of theological conviction. At some level, I suspect I could not help but find myself writing as a pastor with other pastors in mind. If nothing more perhaps a few more bridges between campus and congregation will be strengthened as a result of our remembrance of King's theological legacy and the ways in which it served to transform "the jangling discords" of his day.