

Gilbreath, E. (1998, March 2). [Catching up with a Dream: Evangelicals and Race 30 Years after the Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) Christianity Today, pp. 21-29.

OVERVIEW

On April 4, 1968, at a small Christian institution called Los Angeles Baptist College (now [Master's College](#), under president John MacArthur), Dolphus Weary was receiving a Christian liberal arts education on a basketball scholarship. (Upon high school graduation, Dolphus had become the beneficiary of the ambition of the college's basketball coach, finally breaking the color-barrier entrenched at the school throughout its 30-year history.)

As he sat on his bed holding back the tears, Weary could hear voices down the hall: white students talking about King's shooting. But Weary quickly realized that they were not just talking; they were laughing. 'These Christian kids were glad that Dr. King, my hero, had been shot...Laughing at Dr. King's death was just like laughing at me, or at the millions of other blacks for whom King labored.'

Evangelicals, it appears, have made at least some progress since that day of Martin Luther King's assassination. Or maybe racism has just become more sophisticated. Great division persists between the perceptions of blacks and whites in America. While 76% of white Americans believe blacks have equal opportunity for jobs, only 49% of blacks believe this. Even more obvious is white evangelical staunch support for Republican politics, contrasted with the black church's support for Democrats. Thirty plus years 30 after the peak of the civil-rights movement, blacks' and whites' experiences of life in America remain very, very divergent.

The legacy of King's life and work is an increasingly complicated one: a reality befitting the real radicalism of a very human activist for justice. People of faith can no longer deify him as a tame savior or dismiss him as a "liberal rabble-rouser." The success of King's work can be seen in the fact that white evangelicals are more greatly discomfited when confronted with racial issues: the unquestioned assumption of white privilege is increasingly challenged. For the black church, just the respect accorded the diversity of opinions about King's message indicates that, if nothing else, stereotypes

about black attitudes are the residuals of only the woefully undereducated or the willfully ignorant. Furthermore, the "moderation" of many evangelicals in 1968 and 1998 is now rightly seen as just the cop-out stance of those living in fear of, and rebellion against, true justice. In 1960, even Billy Graham, who had done some work in desegregating his crusades, referred to King's nonviolent resistance as the strategy of an "extreme Negro leader...going to far and too fast." These days, Glen Kehrein, executive director of [Circle Urban Ministries](#) in Chicago, is able to say,

'For the most part, evangelicals...no longer have the "social gospel" concern [i.e., that the message of eternal salvation will be swallowed by this-worldly concerns for human welfare]. They have come to see that the gospel must have social implications and have recognized the great contributions of King and civil-rights leaders.'

Despite Kehrein's optimism, however, other leaders note the real-life inability and/or unwillingness of white evangelicals to Christianly comprehend their present historical situation. Don Argue, president of the [National Association of Evangelicals](#) and an Assemblies of God minister, reports,

'Whenever I go to a black Christian gathering...the subject of racism is always on the agenda, and it's near the top. They're not whining or complaining, but they are deeply concerned. On the other hand, you go to a white meeting and very rarely, if ever, is racism on the agenda. I've come to the conclusion that it's because African-Americans deal with racism on an ongoing basis...'

For their part, many black evangelical ministers have so imbibed the spirit of King's Dream that they are increasingly ready to question King's particular formulations of it. While some still see racial integration as crucial for a healthy church and society, others are not at all convinced, demanding that respect-not assimilation-be the African-American community's primary goal. Eugene Rivers, pastor of Boston's [Azusa Christian Community](#), is notably clear-thinking in his critique:

'King's theological and racial liberalism gave inadequate attention to the primacy of culture, tradition and history. The truth is, both blacks

and whites identify with their particular traditions: and that's not wrong. It only becomes wrong when it promotes injustice.'

Neither does Rivers have much patience for contemporary attempts at racial reconciliation: He makes the crucial recognition that event-focused repentance is not only near-meaningless, but will actually be harmful where it too quickly salves the conscience and avoids the truly painful self-denial involved in promoting full-orbed change. Steering clear of any blanket dismissals, Rivers is nevertheless piquant:

'Much of the current race-relations discourse, like what happens at Promise Keepers, substitutes fundamentalist hugfests for the kind of deep, substantive dialogue that has a genuine impact on institutional decisions and public policy. Too much of the reconciliation rhetoric of white evangelicals focuses on interpersonal piety without any radically biblical conception of racial justice.'

Since it is endemic to contemporary Christians to secretly (or openly!) congratulate themselves on the depth of their repentance, white evangelical reactions to Rivers' prophetic words will be revealing of their true sincerity. Probably, some will protest that some repentance is better than none at all (which sounds suspiciously like saying that lukewarm is better than cold). Others (it may be hoped), both white and black, will survey the sociopolitical and economic landscape, as well as their own lifestyle choices and voting patterns, and accept the truth that the phrase "radically biblical" describes race relations in the church little more (if any) than it does the wider society. [Denver Seminary's](#) Malcolm Newton acknowledges the obvious:

'King and other Christians of the civil-rights movement put their lives on the line. Protesting, marching, getting bombed and thrown into jail hundreds or time for the sake of biblical justice. That's a legacy that King left for us, and the church hasn't grabbed onto it yet.'

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- How do the recent revelations of King's sexual and other improprieties affect your view of his message of racial justice?
- Regardless of your own racial or ethnic background, are you able to hear complaints about oppression as legitimate, or do they only

sound like "whining" to you?

- Could you explain black leaders' wariness of the [Promise Keepers](#) racial reconciliation, or the [Southern Baptist Convention's](#) public confession, or other such events?

IMPLICATIONS

- Young people are doing much better, it seems, in the area of race relations. We must be careful that, living under the blessings of the civil-rights movement, they don't forget the reasons for its necessity or the lessons learned through it. Only by understanding their parents' and grandparents' world will they be able to live prophetically in their own.
- Integration does not itself bring respect. Assimilation often means a devaluing of oneself. Young people would benefit from discussions and exercises emphasizing that different does not mean less respectable.
- At the same time, "diversity programs" (secular or church-related) are dangerous if left superficial. There is no substitute for the ongoing encountering of other people's experiences in our multicultural world.

cCYS