

# EDITORIAL

## Theology and Social Action

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The rate of change in the present world is frightening. It is not that one would question the fact that much human good emerges from this flux. It is simply that crises of staggering impact that should be instructive and chastening for us all take place and, long before the full import and chastening that a good Providence intended have been assimilated, the events are lost in the shadows of the past. One wonders if this is not the case with the death of Dr. Martin Luther King.

If the death of Dr. King was tragic and shocking, his funeral should have been instructive. How could the world have been made more dramatically conscious of the fact of the religious and theological roots of the vision of Dr. King and of the mission to which he had committed himself? Who is there who was not deeply affected by the frequent intrusion of Jesus Christ and biblical text, concept, and simile into the ceremonies? This writer will not soon forget the sight of the mule drawn wagon for the almost revivalistic atmosphere in which Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, the high and the low, the non-violent contender for civil rights and the more militant advocate for "black power" were all invited to join in the singing of all the verses of "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling," described by a nationally famous news commentator as Dr. King's favorite hymn, "a hymn of great and moving beauty." It was obvious that the ideals of justice, righteousness, and human dignity which moved this man were rooted deeply in a Protestant biblical heritage.

American evangelicalism has not tended to look upon Dr. King as a

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part of itself, due in measure to the fact that Dr. King identified himself more closely with more liberal movements. Perhaps he did so because too much of evangelicalism has never taken seriously enough the social implications of the very Gospel to which it is committed. Too often evangelicalism has been unaware of the radical character of the implications for justice, righteousness, and human dignity that the biblical account of the Creator-Savior demands. The Church at large suffers today from this short-sightedness. We have tended not to know how big the Gospel is that we hold.

Now the funeral of Dr. King raises some other questions. Can true brotherhood ever be achieved apart from a truly biblical understanding of the character of man and his relationship with his Maker? Can a just society be established that does not commit itself to understand the biblical view of *law* and the role of societal institutions represented in the state? Will true brotherhood be achieved without the regenerating power of Christ? Does the church fulfill its role when it becomes little more than a power block devoted to "the dynamics of planned social change"? Can the Gospel ever be *identified* with "a social crusade" or "a program for social reform"?

David Kucharsky, writing in a recent issue of *Christianity Today* (Vol. XII, p. 855), commented upon the recent Uniting Conference of the Methodist Church. He suggested that the saddest aspect of the Conference from the standpoint of the debate on the role of the Church in the current social revolution was that "radical activists were confronted merely in pragmatic dimensions," with virtually no challenge to "liberal presuppositions at the idea level, much less on biblical ground."

Is it now going to be necessary for the nation to go through a *reverse* segregation, internal anarchy, and another Dark Age in order for us to learn that we can no more safely neglect the full biblical message that is at the root of Dr. King's "dream" than we could afford to deny the social implications of the word that comes to us from the God who spoke through Old Testament prophets and offers redemption through His atoning Son? Our problem is still a theological one. If some have denied the logical consequences of the Christian Gospel, must we stand by while another generation destroys the possibilities of those good consequences by demanding the fruit of the Gospel while ignoring or repudiating the only soil in which these fruits can grow?