

King's Way: A Christian Approach to Conflict
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Introduction

In this paper, I will argue that King's approach to conflict can be best understood as a search for the truth that is embedded within any conflict in order to bring change to all sides that will support the American and Christian values of love, equality, and justice. King assumed that behind any conflict there was a deeper conflict over moral principles that needed to be confronted. The truth was embedded in the conflict, but obscured by both sides' superficial approaches to conflict (*Gandhi's Way*, 3). King analyzed the fundamental moral dimensions of conflict and argued that in order to actively engage with our adversaries, we must use nonviolent direct action to deepen our understanding of the conflict. This will ensure that all parties will remain focused on potentially shared truths in order to build a foundation for resolution and agreements.

King used his Christian religious beliefs as a foundation for forming his strategies and concepts. Nonviolence was fundamental for him, like Jesus' philosophy of turning the other cheek, and Jesus' philosophy of learning to love our neighbors as ourselves was very important to the civil rights movement. King believed that through the Christian concept of love, equality and justice could be understood and achieved. Justice and equality come from having love for others, black and white, and from applying the Christian call to love our enemies as ourselves. To King, nonviolence was the best method to achieve the goal of justice and equality because nonviolence exposes the true nature of the conflict in loving ways that demonstrate that equality only makes sense when it is applied to everyone.

King wanted American citizens to realize the full potential of their country. His dream of equality for African Americans was rooted in the American dream (*Citizen King*). At the march on Selma, Alabama in 1965, the federal government issued an injunction against the civil rights protestors saying that they could not march in support of voting equality. When King reached the bridge to Selma, and the police suddenly changed their tactics and chose not to block their path, King chose to turn around rather than continue the march (*Citizen King*). King deeply believed in America and wanted to go through the courts to achieve his goals, he did not want to achieve justice and love by breaking the law of the America that he so deeply believed in. He believed in the phrase from the Declaration of Independence "All Men are Created Equal." He sought to change the fundamental structure of American culture and society. American culture encourages poverty and racism whenever we fail to challenge the notion that individuals are poor because they are lazy. King fought against the idea that poor blacks deserve to be poor and discriminated against by presenting the idea that the culture of America facilitated the cycle of poverty, especially in the African American community by failing to offer equal opportunities in terms of employment and wages.

Fighting a Tough Minded Fight

King approaches conflict management by using nonviolence to discover the true arguments over moral principals embedded within conflicts that are shared by all parties. King chooses to use specific nonviolent actions and even specifically chose the word equality, in order to reveal the hatred and racism prevalent in white America. King used nonviolent protests to expose the injustice of racism toward African Americans. He chose the word equality because the term is not individualistic, being equal inherently involves another person. Equality reveals the weakness of thinking in terms of individuals being at fault, and does not leave room for conflict. Either whites treat African Americans as though their lives have equal importance, or they cannot claim to value equality. Whites cannot fight against equality, because it is morally right.

Nonviolence is also important because, in King's view, it allows African Americans to maintain their dignity and discipline in light of injustice. In *Where Do We Go From Here*, King, speaking of the march in Mississippi, says that "We left the room assuring him that we would conduct the march in his spirit and would seek as never before to expose the ugly racism that pervaded Mississippi and to arouse a new sense of dignity and manhood in every Negro who inhabited that bastion of man's inhumanity to man (King, 25)." King recognized that when African Americans organize peaceful marches on predominantly white towns, whites were angry and violent towards them. He expected his nonviolent methods will to powerfully reveal the white racism until there is no racism or injustice to expose, and allow African Americans to retain their dignity while fostering awareness, understanding, and change.

Preaching nonviolence, love, and equality is easy. King takes it a step further because he puts these values into action. King is tough minded because practicing nonviolence in the face of adversity is hard, and it means that there will be suffering. "The central quality in the Negro's life is pain—pain so old and so deep that it shows in almost every moment of his existence (King, 109)." Exposing the deeply rooted racism in white America is emotionally and physically difficult because it is exposed when whites inflict hatred and violence upon African Americans. Whites do not understand what it is like to be black in America. Blacks were slaves, then they were freed into a world where they were resented, hated, and had no opportunities for advancement. They faced discrimination every where they went, solely because of the color of their skin. King is saying that African Americans experience pain every single day, and it shows. King is preaching the values of love, but it is a hard thing to do. King knew that his movement would be difficult and that it would involve suffering a great deal, but he stuck to his true values based on his commitment to Christianity and America.

For King, using nonviolence leads to taking direct and influential action, because the condition of African Americans could not change unless they took the necessary actions to change it. King wanted to change the structure of American society. Gaining liberties through the civil rights legislation was a victory, but somewhat hollow as the true victory would be changing the culture in America. Legislation could not change the way that people think and act towards one another, nor could it instill the concepts of Christianity and equality. King used nonviolent direct action to force a deeper understanding and ultimately a change within American society. His goal is to change

people's hearts. He needs to make white America see that African Americans are the same people that they are, so that equality can become a reality. King also knew that African Americans could not achieve justice and equality simply by waiting for whites to grant it to them (Moses, Chapter 1). African Americans had to be completely dedicated to their cause because racism is unyielding.

Why Fight At All?

Fighting productively is valuable because it reveals the true moral positions held (and sometimes shared) by ourselves and our adversaries. Real emotional conflicts can become better understood when a person is confronted. King confronts whites in a nonviolent way in order to expose their true feelings about racism, and also bring both sides together around common moral truths. King is bothered by whites because they say that they are not racist, but when they are confronted with an interracial situation, their true racist feelings become known. One of King's goals is for white Americans to see that they are acting with racism and hatred. He hopes that if whites can realize the harm that their prejudice had on the African American community, they will want to change the way they treat them.

In the video *Citizen King*, a black woman was speaking about her experience in King's nonviolent march on Selma. She said, and we observed, that the whites were very angry that the blacks were marching in their town. The white citizens began shouting at them, and throwing bricks at them. These were the same whites that were civil to this woman everyday when she worked with them at the office. This is an example of whites who do not see their own hatred and racism, or its direct and long standing impact on African Americans. When they are confronted by the nonviolent African Americans marching down the street, and respond with anger and violence, observer's can see what this woman's white office workers do not. This is also an example of why fighting is important to King. Justice cannot be achieved until everyone realizes that justice is missing. Most likely, the whites that she worked with thought that they were not racist and that the African American woman was equal to them because she worked where they did. However, through fighting and taking action, it was revealed that the truth was that those whites had racist feelings.

To King, using violence against racists will not gain anything. Using violence against racist whites is not beneficial because it does not show how wrong, unjust, and inhumane racism is (Moses, Chapter 4). Violence only demonstrates anger, and anger only clouds the mind. A person cannot think clearly or make good decisions when they let their anger take control of their thoughts and actions, which is why violence and anger are unproductive. In *Revolution of Conscience*, King says that "Violence makes a Structure unbearable, but nonviolence makes it wrong (Moses, Chapter 4)." Violence is a sign of weakness, because it only shows the anger and resentment of an unhelpful situation. King is hopeful that America can change, and he is trying to give hope to the African American community, and not let their despair take hold of them because if they do, then the fighting will be unproductive because it will not achieve anything.

African Americans had been suffering ever since there were forced to come to America. Their families were ripped apart by slavery, and lives shattered by endless servitude and despair. When they were granted freedom it was conditional, and they continued to be oppressed. “Thrown off the plantations, penniless, homeless, still largely in the territory of their enemies and in the grip of fear, bewilderment and aimlessness, hundreds of thousands became wanderers (King, 112).” The Emancipation Proclamation gave African Americans the right to be free, but it did not give them the right to be treated equally, it did not give them the right to vote, to hold the same jobs as whites, and although they were free, they had been slaves so they had no money to begin new lives, many did not know where their mother or brother or sister was, or even what last name they could have. Black power is acting out a justifiable frustration, but King says that nothing will be gained from that, because this is not the proper way to fight. King understands why the black power movement is appealing and that it comes from bitter disappointment from whites and from the country that they live in. Nevertheless, it alienates African Americans from white Americans and distracts both from the evils of racism. King agrees that taking action and fighting are important, however Black Power will not reveal the true racism towards African Americans because it distracts from seeing racism.

Black Power creates fear in whites, making their racism seem justifiable, and it also isolates African Americans (Moses, Chapter 5). Whites do not understand African Americans because of segregation, and it is human nature to fear something that you do not understand. The Black Power movement also rejects the involvement of whites. King’s argument is that there are whites that have been struggling with African Americans in the nonviolent movement (Moses, Chapter 5). A good way to create racial understanding would be through contact, and equality will follow from understanding. The more that African Americans and whites struggle together, the more they will understand each other, which is exactly what King wants to achieve in his movement. Fighting and struggling together can create racial understanding which can lead to equality.

Black Power also condones the use of violence. King opposes violence on a fundamental level, but it is very important that he makes the distinction that him opposing violence is not the ultimate reason for the nonviolent movement. Violence is not a valuable form of fighting because it does not help in the search for truth and justice. Black violence will only be used by whites to justify their racism. After the riots, whites thought they were justified in their hatred of African Americans because they were violent and burned their houses. This is an unproductive way to fight because it makes segregation seem justified to whites, instead of making whites see the injustice in it, which is the point of fighting.

Whenever violence occurred, no matter how big or small the act of violence was, there was white backlash and King was blamed for the violence because he was stirring up trouble with his movement (*Citizen King*). Whites only became more angered and fearful of African Americans when violence was used, which is the exact opposite of what King was trying to achieve through his nonviolence movement. King argues that

racism is not something that African Americans created; it is something that always existed. Through the nonviolent actions of African Americans, racism was brought out into the open. King fought in a productive way to reveal the hatred, while violence reinforced the hatred which made it an unproductive way to fight.

Why are Equality and Love so Important?

King's concept of love gives meaning to the nonviolence movement. King does not make the argument that justice is impossible without love. Rather, he argues that if a person has love, then they will choose justice and equality. Equality proceeds from the heart (Moses, Chapter 1). A person that chooses to have love, even for his oppressors, will choose to be nonviolent. When King shows violent racist whites that he is acting out of love and respect, he hopes that they will choose to also be nonviolent, and eventually that whites will choose to love African Americans as themselves.

For King, everything starts with love. It is the love that he has for America and the love he has for his people that calls him to the movement in the first place, and it is that love that made him keep fighting for justice and equality every day. Love is the key to nonviolence because it demonstrates that African Americans still have love and respect for whites even through the oppression and hatred. If whites can realize this, they will accept love themselves, which in turn promotes equality.

King says that if you have love, equality and justice will follow (Moses, Chapter 1). Equality is important to King because it is something that involves all American citizens, regardless of race or social status. King uses equality to apply the movement to everyone so that the connection between African Americans and poor whites will be realized. King loves America, and he wants it to be a country that treats everyone with dignity. He thinks that more needs to be done to help people in poverty and to help African Americans. Poor whites and poor blacks are very similar in their conditions, however, poor whites have the opportunity to overcome their poverty, while African Americans are oppressed. They do not have the same opportunities for employment, earn the same wages, and they are even limited on the conditions that they can live in. King demanded social change by eliminating the structures of American society that foster poverty and racism.

That is also why King argues that poverty and oppression is not the fault of the individual, and nothing good can be achieved from blaming an individual for their racism. While he also insists that each individual has a responsibility to oppose racism, poverty, and violence within our own communities. This is what King hears the Christian call to love our neighbors as ourselves. Blaming individuals is unproductive because the habits of racism are embedded in American culture. Whites are taught to be racist their whole lives. It is the culture of America, the structure of American society that must be changed. "If we are seeking a home, there is not much value in discussing blueprints if we have no money and are barred from acquiring the land (King, 144)." While individuals cannot be personally blamed for their poverty, or their racism, individuals responsibility for making a change is required. King is fighting to change the structure of America from a society that fosters poverty and racism into a society that has equality for

everyone. King is not saying that individuals are unaccountable for their actions, but that it is society that gave them their racist beliefs, and it is our challenge as individuals and as a nation to change these structures.

Love your Neighbor as Yourself: Justice and Love

King's concept of justice is rooted in the Christian view of love, loving thy neighbor as oneself (Moses, Chapter 5). Despite the rampant inequality and oppression, King was urging the African American people to use love so they could understand whites and respect them, so that whites in turn could understand and respect blacks. Whites need love from African Americans in order to remove their insecurities and fears (Moses, Chapter 5). King chose to lead by example and encouraged African Americans need to take the moral high ground and lead by example. "It is enormously difficult for any oppressed people even to arrive at an awareness of their latent strengths (King, 145)." This is an amazing feat, because whites have placed the importance of an African Americans life beneath theirs, simply because of their race.

King's focus on using love as a way to gain respect both strengthens and weakens his argument. It strengthens his argument because it is logical. Whites are afraid of African Americans, and replacing that fear with love would help their cause. However, it weakens his argument because the concept of loving whites is hard for African Americans to grasp in a context where that love is not reciprocal. They have been, and continue to be, deeply hurt by the actions of whites. King is asking them to put aside the suffering, and treat them with respect, and it is extremely difficult to let go of the hurt and anger in their hearts.

The Christian concept that "All men are made in the image of God" is very important to King. If that is true, then African Americans can not be less than whites, because God loves everyone. Every person has rights that were given to him by God, and the government has no right to take away those rights (King, 86-88). This strengthens his argument because it is also rooted in the American tradition. American currency says "In God We Trust." King wants Americans to realize that if their beliefs are rooted in Christianity and in God, then there is no reason why racism should exist. Under god, all men are brothers, everyone is equal. These are the principals that America was built upon, because these are the principals that Christianity was built upon.

Concluding Thoughts

My thinking has grown from the obvious to critically analyzing. In my early papers I was making statements without supporting them or fully analyzing them. I wrote of King's nonviolent strategy as being because violence distracted from the real issues. This is true, however violence is not a good strategy because it does not demonstrate the unjustness of racism, and it cannot bring the achievement of equality because it attacks the individual, not the structures that foster hatred. I also wrote about nonviolence as a way to gain empathy for African Americans. A better way to think about that is that nonviolence forces whites to realize that they are the ones that are racist, and that being racist is not right.

King also avoids unproductive conflict. Violence is unproductive because it does not reveal the true conflict, and King also recognizes that attacking America and attacking whites for their racist attitudes would be unproductive. Displaying hatred is easy, hatred and anger are easy emotions. However, King did not choose the easy path, nothing about his nonviolent movement was easy. King preached about love and equality, but also about the struggling and the strength needed to practice love. Loving whites was a difficult concept because of the atrocities that whites had committed against African Americans, starting with forcing them to this country to be their slaves. King's optimism in America was also a hard concept. The government had done very little to help African Americans. The Emancipation Proclamation freed them, but they had no money and no where to go, their families were ripped apart, and they were in no way treated as equals by whites or by the government.

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