

# Revives My Soul Again: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Classic Wisdom of the Discernment of Spirits

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## Abstract

*The work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. remains deeply influential in justice discourse. In this paper, the author employs classic wisdom of the discernment of spirits to explore whether King's words can be determined as influenced by the Holy Spirit. While the impact of King's writing and speeches are not in doubt, the question of divine influence is important to consider as issues of racial and economic justice persist today. Focusing specifically on three of King's works ("The Letter from Birmingham Jail," "I Have a Dream," and "I Have Been to the Mountaintop"), the author argues that these works align with markers of the Holy Spirit at work, and as such, King's words remain vital to the pursuit of justice today on the social and spiritual levels.*

When considering social justice in contemporary Christian discourse, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s writings and speeches are essential. Murdered at age 39 for the power of his public witness against racism and economic injustice, Dr. King continues to inform present understandings of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as they relate to modern Christian expressions of civil rights.

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King's preaching and writing were, to his own mind, inspired by the Holy Spirit. He self-identified as someone who spoke "as a minister of the Gospel who loves the church, who was nurtured in her bosom, who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings, and who will remain true to it as long as the chord of life shall lengthen."<sup>1</sup> And yet, as a Christian, he was surely aware that his "opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion as he looks for someone to devour (1 Pet 5:8)." By his prayer, spirituality, and theological training, King was aware that in his discernment, the Holy Spirit and the devil competed for his attention. As John Cassian says, "Above all we should realize that there are three sources for our thoughts - God, the devil, and ourselves."<sup>2</sup> King, like all Christians, was vulnerable to the evil spirit and had to discern whether at any time he was caught by its snares.

In this paper, I will explore three of King's most well-known works and engage them using classic wisdom of the discernment of spirits. These works - "Letter from Birmingham Jail," "I Have a Dream," and "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" - represent his most foundational, famous, and final messages to Christians seeking racial and economic justice. The question in this paper is not whether his call for justice was warranted; recent history continues to reveal that racial and economic justice are necessary in pursuit of a world that honors the dignity of every human person. The question is, rather, whether "Letter From Birmingham Jail," "I Have a Dream," and "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" are the work of a man inspired by the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr, "Letter From Birmingham Jail," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1963, 79.

<sup>2</sup> John Cassian, "Conference One: The Goal or Objective of the Monk," in *John Cassian: Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist, 1985), 52.

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Some may think that testing King's words for alignment with classical wisdom of the discernment of spirits is unnecessary. After all, he is still honored substantially with a federal holiday, a memorial in Washington, D.C., and with his name on countless schools, streets, centers, and awards. These honors do not, however, cast aside the fact that hate groups are on the rise in the United States, that critical race theory is a flash point in schools, that the Movement for Black Lives is harshly criticized by majority white Christian and political institutions, and that racist structures like the prison industrial complex continue to damage Black and Brown communities. Affirming that King worked through the Holy Spirit gives new weight to his words, and draws them back into the urgent sphere which prompted them in the first place. In what follows, I will engage sources and sentiments from across the tradition of the discernment of spirits and argue that King was acting, speaking, and writing in response to the Holy Spirit at work in his life. To make this argument, I rely substantially on Fr. Barton Geger, S.J.'s work compiling rules for classic wisdom of the discernment of spirits.

### **The Most Foundational: "Letter from Birmingham Jail"**

On Good Friday, April 12, 1963, King and fifty other civil rights activists were arrested and jailed in Birmingham, Alabama for failing to obey a court order prohibiting them from publicly protesting segregation. The court order and subsequent arrests were part of local and statewide efforts to end a campaign against segregation in Birmingham initiated earlier in 1963 by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Headed by King, the SCLC was at the time an organization of eighty-five affiliate groups from across the American South that engaged in non-violent action programs against racism.

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That same Good Friday, eight white clergymen from Birmingham published an open letter in the Birmingham News titled “A Call For Unity” which urged that issues of race be dealt with in the courts and not by means of public protest: “When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets.”<sup>4</sup> Four days later, King responded to them with his formidable “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” in which he argued that nonviolent public protest is the right pathway toward racial justice and solidarity. By its language of commitment to community, its treatment of suffering, its broad and deep responsibility to the Christian faith, and its appropriate emotional response to hardship, “Letter From Birmingham Jail” helps reveal King to be under the influence of the Holy Spirit. In the letter, King envisions unity, not division. He advocates for the better treatment of Black people and offers staunch criticisms of the American system of legal segregation, predominantly white Christian churches, and Black extremist groups.<sup>5</sup> Unity, communion, and community are the clear goals brought forth in the letter, and each are achievable through direct, nonviolent action.

King and his community will not isolate themselves or withdraw from the particular challenge that lies before them.<sup>6</sup> He writes, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all

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<sup>4</sup> “A Call for Unity,” last modified December 19, 2000, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/sites/mlk/files/lesson-activities/clergybirmingham1963.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Barton Geger, “Fifty Classic Rules for the Discernment of Spirits,” rule 18, revised February 22, 2022. Note that Geger’s list is formally unpublished and is cited / included as an appendix with permission from the author. For question regarding sources for Geger’s list, he can be reached via email at [Barton.Geger@bc.edu](mailto:Barton.Geger@bc.edu). At the author’s request, this list should not be reproduced without permission.

<sup>6</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 2.

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indirectly.”<sup>7</sup> He does not write out of concern for Black people only, though they are the immediate concern due to violence done against them. Rather, he writes for the benefit of all people in an immediate, but also past and future sense.

He also writes in a simultaneously hyper-local and global sense.<sup>8</sup> While the particular issue he addresses is spurred by his experience in Birmingham, he writes for the whole community which faced similar injustice across the country.<sup>9</sup> This movement from local to broader concern recalls Paul’s epistles, which were addressed to specific faith communities, but which were quickly compiled and offered to the whole Church as inspiration for unity and right relationship. In this pursuit of unity, King and his community are clearly willing to suffer. Time and time again, he points to the suffering that occurs and the capacity to persist in light of a clear vision of justice. He presents a stunning list of transgressions committed against Black people, including the lynching of folks who were unarmed and untried, denial of jobs, denial of access to voting, and denial of desegregated education.<sup>10</sup> And yet, in spite of this hardship, these same people continued entering into moments of intense nonviolent protest. They faced dogs, fire hoses, police batons, verbal assaults, and risk of death. King himself was arrested 29 times; the occasion for his writing “Letter From Birmingham Jail” was only one of many times he was jailed for his actions.<sup>11</sup> While many of his Black brothers and sisters faced abuse throughout their

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<sup>7</sup> King, “Letter,” 78.

<sup>8</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 6.

<sup>9</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 2.

<sup>10</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 11; King, “Letter,” 81.

<sup>11</sup> “Martin Luther King, Jr. – Arrests,” accessed April 21, 2021: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/mlk-topic/martin-luther-king-jr-arrests>.

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entire lives, he makes special mention of white people who are also willing to suffer alongside them: “They sat with us at lunch counters and rode with us on freedom rides. They have languished in filthy roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of angry policemen...”<sup>12</sup> Here, it is important to note that while many are willing to suffer for their own immediate family or intimate community, King displays a willingness to suffer representatively; he suffers for many more than those whom he immediately knows and loves. His conception of neighbor is broad and diverse.

In the spirit of love of neighbor, King clearly acts out of his Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps nothing proves this more simply than the sheer fact that King writes from jail. While he did gain prominence in the national media for his work in protesting segregation, overstating the adversity he faced is difficult. His family and life were threatened regularly. The FBI tapped his phones and kept sensitive information about his personal life which could be used against him. He was ultimately killed.<sup>14</sup> Yet, none of this was born from his own sense of things, but rather by his knowledge of and commitment to the Christian faith. He makes his case in “Letter From Birmingham Jail” by pointing to the consistency of his vision with that of such revered theologians as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Buber and Paul Tillich.<sup>15</sup> He also invokes biblical witnesses, including Jesus Christ himself, the Apostle Paul, and the Old Testament figures Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.<sup>16</sup> He nods to heroic early Christians like

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<sup>12</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 20; King, “Letter,” 84.

<sup>13</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 19.

<sup>14</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 20.

<sup>15</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rules 3 and 31; King, “Letter,” 82..

<sup>16</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 20; King, “Letter,” 83.

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Perpetua and Felicity who faced “hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire.”<sup>17</sup> He takes no credit for the inspiration of his actions, but rather finds and grounds his action in the spirit and tradition of people of faith.

It is in the Christian spirit that such strong sentiments are present in “Letter From Birmingham Jail.” The letter is a rhetorical work, containing images meant to evoke emotion: “For years now, I have heard the word ‘wait.’ ...This ‘wait’ has almost always meant ‘never.’ It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration.”<sup>18</sup> Note the reference to the over 10,000 babies born globally in the 1950’s and 60’s with severe physical deformities as a result of thalidomide. Surely, this imagery placed alongside images of racial injustice would generate an emotional response (Rule 33).

It is important to observe, however, that King's argument is not ultimately an emotional appeal. The letter is framed by a rational argument. He writes, “In any nonviolent campaign, there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham...racial justice engulfs this community.”<sup>19</sup> When confronted with persecution, it is reasonable to expect a strong emotional response, and yet given the rational argument King

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<sup>17</sup> King, “Letter,” 83.

<sup>18</sup> King, “Letter,” 80.

<sup>19</sup> King, “Letter,” 79.

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makes, emotion serves to illustrate the urgency of the cause and enhance the argument made.<sup>20</sup> The letter ends not with an emotional appeal, but with an appeal to the truth and to the potential for his own shortcomings.<sup>21</sup> Incredibly, “Letter From Birmingham Jail” presents a humble tone, reflective and transparent.<sup>22</sup>

If there remains any question as to whether “Letter From Birmingham Jail” is the work of a man inspired by the Holy Spirit, it is worth considering the ways in which his letter mirror those works of two essential early Christians: the Apostle Paul and Ignatius of Antioch. King’s letter bears striking similarities to Paul’s letters. One such similarity was mentioned earlier in this paper: King, like Paul, writes for a specific audience but has a much broader and deeper impact. In her important article, “Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter From Birmingham Jail’ as Pauline Epistle,” rhetoric scholar Malinda Snow identifies at least three other similarities. First, King and Paul both assume a common ground with their audience.<sup>23</sup> Paul always unites himself with those to whom he writes, and King seeks to acknowledge and embrace the clergyman identity with those to whom he writes.<sup>24</sup> In addition, King seeks to meet with those to whom he writes, just as Paul does.<sup>25</sup> Finally, King, like Paul, seeks to invite readers to a kind of ‘liturgical’ action in response; Paul asks his audiences to change for the sake of their faith, and King seeks a similar

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<sup>20</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 34.

<sup>21</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 34.

<sup>22</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rules 1, 8, and 15.

<sup>23</sup> Malinda Snow, “Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter From Birmingham Jail’ As Pauline Epistle,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71 (1985), 331.

<sup>24</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 19.

<sup>25</sup> Geger, “Rules”: rule 12; Snow, “King’s Letter,” 331.



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change.<sup>26</sup> This change is liturgical in the sense that it happens in communion, and it only happens with a unity of mind and heart.

King's letter also bears similarities to Ignatius of Antioch's Letter to the Romans in at least two ways. First, both King and Ignatius are willing to suffer for freedom. Ignatius writes, "But if I suffer, I shall be emancipated by Jesus Christ; and united to him, I shall rise to freedom."<sup>27</sup> Second, Ignatius, like King and his followers, simply wants to emulate Jesus by his life and work. Ignatius says plainly, "Let me imitate the Passion of my God."<sup>28</sup> King, in a similar vein, cites one of the elderly women who protested with him: "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested."<sup>29</sup> In 1963, King's writing reflects the plight of Christians who wrote nineteen centuries prior.

"Letter From Birmingham Jail" is a testament to King's belief and practice. Simultaneously bold and humble, emotional and rational, immediate and transcendent, it serves as an example of the clear work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a member of the Christian faithful. As such, Christians today would do well to read it and absorb its reflection of the Holy Spirit at work in King's life.

### **The Most Famous: "I Have a Dream"**

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<sup>26</sup> Geger, "Rules," rule 23; Snow, "King's Letter," 332.

<sup>27</sup> Geger, "Rules," rule 20; Ignatius of Antioch, "Letter to the Romans," in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril Richardson (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 104.

<sup>28</sup> Ignatius, "Romans," 105.

<sup>29</sup> King, "Letter," 87.

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On August 28, 1963, four months after King wrote “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” he and somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000 other protesters descended upon Washington, D.C. to participate in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The number of people present at the March pales the mere fifty King was arrested with in Birmingham, and reveals a willingness on the part of organizers to empower people through direct nonviolent action and to share the work of protest.<sup>30</sup> The March remains one of the largest demonstrations for civil rights in US history, and is credited with helping pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

King was an invited guest of the organizers and shared the speakers’ dais with the Very Reverend Patrick O’Boyle, John Lewis, Mathew Ahmann, Rabbis Uri Miller and Joachim Prinz, and Mahalia Jackson, among others.<sup>31</sup> O’Boyle was the Catholic Archbishop of Washington. At the time, Lewis was the chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and would later serve in Congress for 33 years. Ahmann was the Executive Director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice. Miller and Prinz were leaders in the Jewish effort for civil rights. Jackson was the most famous gospel singer of the civil rights movement, and helped shape King’s words at the March. The communion of leaders from different organizations and faith traditions marks the work of the Holy Spirit as extending beyond a limited or isolated vision.<sup>32</sup>

King’s speech at the March is among the most recognizable in American rhetoric. Few are unfamiliar with “I Have a Dream.” Incredibly, the famous repetition of the phrase “I have a

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<sup>30</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 11.

<sup>31</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 31.

<sup>32</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 2.

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dream” was not included in King’s prepared text. The language of dreams was not uncommon in his past rhetoric, but it was during the speech itself that King was encouraged to speak from the heart. In that moment, he chose the language of dreams to make his point. Sociologist and theologian Nichole Phillips writes, “While speaking to a national audience...King inserts the ‘Dream’ peroration at the prodding of gospel singer turned civil rights activist Mahalia Jackson.”<sup>33</sup> He was attentive to the crowd around him, which moved him to shift his words.<sup>34</sup> In short, a large part of King’s most famous remarks - the litany of phrases that are framed by the words “I have a dream” - is improvised, “where King harnesses the creative nature of spirit and soul...”<sup>35</sup> A key characteristic of preaching in the Black Christian tradition is attunement to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Frank Thomas, a homiletics professor, says that “the Black preacher is dependent on a power beyond the preacher’s power. The Holy Spirit ultimately shapes and delivers the message through the preacher.”<sup>36</sup> Classic wisdom on the discernment of spirits affirms this openness to improvisation in writing and speaking. Had King treated this occasion before hundreds of thousands of people as he did any other speaking engagement, one might conclude that he was operating out of fear or concern to make sure that each prewritten word was in its proper place. Few would fault a person for sticking to the script in such an

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<sup>33</sup> Nichole Phillips, “A Spirituality of Improvisation: Martin Luther King Jr’s ‘I Have a Dream’ in Rearticulating American National Identity,” in *Revives my Soul Again: The Spirituality of Martin Luther King, Jr*, eds. Lewis Baldwin and Victor Anderson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 186.

<sup>34</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 12.

<sup>35</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 22; Phillips, “Improvisation,” 186.

<sup>36</sup> Frank Thomas, *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016), 87.

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environment, but in recognizing the uniqueness and opportunity of the situation, King chose to respond to the Holy Spirit.<sup>37</sup>

In “I Have a Dream,” King emphasizes commitment to unity. This call to unity aligns “I Have a Dream” with “Letter From Birmingham Jail.” He again points toward the oneness of humanity by acknowledging white people in attendance at the March: “They have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone (Rule 34).”<sup>38</sup> He also envisions a world where former adversaries gather as one at God’s bountiful table: “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”<sup>39</sup> He concludes the speech with a plea for this unity: “When we allow freedom to ring...we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the world of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last, free at last, Great God a-mighty, we are free at last.’”<sup>40</sup> <sup>41</sup> The Holy Spirit’s call to unity is found elsewhere in classic wisdom on the discernment of spirits. For example, CS Lewis writes in Letter 18 of the Screwtape Letters that “The whole philosophy of Hell rests on recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specially, that one

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<sup>37</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 42.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr, “I Have a Dream,” speech presented at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, August 28, 1963, transcript accessed at <http://teachtnhistory.org/file/I%20Have%20A%20Dream%20Speech.pdf>, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 2; King, “Dream,” 4.

<sup>40</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rules 2 and 3; King, “Dream,” 6.

<sup>41</sup> King, “Dream,” 6.

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self is not another self. My good is my good and your good is yours.”<sup>42</sup> In Lewis’s interpretation, the evil spirit seeks to divide people apart from one another and coerce them into isolation and selfishness; the good spirit as presented by King draws people into communion.

In “I Have a Dream,” King also treats time in a way that aligns with classic wisdom on the discernment of spirits. The relatively short speech moves clearly from past to present and into the future. He begins his remarks by recalling the Emancipation Proclamation: “This momentous decree is a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seated in the flames of withering injustice.”<sup>43</sup> But, he notes, recollection of the past illuminates the reality of the present.<sup>44</sup> He writes, “We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off... Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God’s children.”<sup>45</sup> The present moment is what matters most.<sup>46</sup> In naming the urgency of the present moment, King looks to the future. This turn toward the future does not paint a romanticized vision of what the world could become, but rather names the hopes and dreams of people in the moment; their intentions are not postponed, but immediately named and actualized.<sup>47</sup>

“I Have a Dream” continues to inspire. In giving this speech, King witnesses to a key characteristic of the Holy Spirit - words that, as Ignatius Loyola might say, “give courage and

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<sup>42</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Harper Collins, 1942), 94.

<sup>43</sup> King, “Dream,” 1.

<sup>44</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 30.

<sup>45</sup> King, “Dream,” 2.

<sup>46</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 6.

<sup>47</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 7.

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strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and quiet, making things easy and removing all obstacles so that the person may move forward in doing good.”<sup>48</sup> Courage and strength are especially gifted by the Holy Spirit during times of desolation. In the heart of the Civil Rights movement, when so many were ready to give up, King delivered a speech which resonates to this day, and which reveals the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through his influence.

### **The Final: “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”**

Nearly five years after the March, King delivered his final sermon. On April 3, 1968, he spoke to the Mason Temple Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tennessee, offering to those gathered words which are commonly called “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” He was assassinated the following day.

Like “I Have a Dream,” “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” is radically situated in the present moment. He preached, “Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world...”<sup>49</sup> Then he imagines a conversation with God, who asks him which age he would most like to live in. After taking congregants briefly through Egypt and Greece, the Roman Empire and Renaissance, the Reformation, and even early American history, he says: “strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty and say, ‘If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy.’”<sup>50</sup> He was not fooled into thinking his present moment was an easy one; he simply acknowledged that the journey continues, and is happy to

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing: 1998), 212.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” sermon given at Mason Temple, April 3, 1968, transcript accessed at <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 6.

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play a part: “But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the 20th century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding.”<sup>51</sup> For King and his community, either nonviolence or nonexistence will win the day, and the time is now.

Focusing on the present, however, does not limit King’s recollection of the past and anticipation of the future. In the sermon, he recalls the time he spent in Birmingham which inspired the “Letter From Birmingham Jail.” He preached, “I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle there...Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth, and they did come; but we just went before the dogs singing, ‘Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around.’”<sup>52</sup> This recollection invokes the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity, as did “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” when he says “The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheater joyfully as though they were going to heaven, with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear.”<sup>53</sup> King, at this point in his life, is at peace with the suffering he will continue to face. He seems aware that death awaits him, perhaps in the immediate future: “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 so, I’m happy, tonight...Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of

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<sup>51</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 33; King, “Mountaintop,” 2.

<sup>52</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 30; King, “Mountaintop,” 3.

<sup>53</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 20; Herbert Mursurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 127.

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the Lord.”<sup>54</sup> <sup>55</sup> In spite of threats against his life, in spite of nearly thirteen years of public ministry and protest, in spite of intense scrutiny, run-ins with violent police, and disagreements with US Presidents, King miraculously finds tranquility in his final words.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, King draws everyone into the work he himself is committed to completing. Calling upon the prophet Amos and Jesus, he implores everyone: “We need all of you.”<sup>57</sup> Recalling the story of the Good Samaritan, he considers whether those who passed by the beaten man were merely afraid, and instead calls everyone to a “dangerous unselfishness.”<sup>58</sup> He says, “Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make American what it ought to be...I thank God, once more, for allowing me to be with you.”<sup>59</sup> Knowing that he did not and could not complete his work alone, he shared it in communion with anyone willing to accompany him.<sup>60</sup> Less than 24 hours later, King was dead, his work left for others else to complete.

## Conclusion

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<sup>54</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 20.

<sup>55</sup> King, “Mountaintop,” 10.

<sup>56</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 32.

<sup>57</sup> Geger, “Rules” rules 2, 3 and 11; King, “Mountaintop,” 4.

<sup>58</sup> King, “Mountaintop,” 6.

<sup>59</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rules 22 and 23; King, “Mountaintop,” 8.

<sup>60</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 2.



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In “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” King quotes a line from a play by T.S. Eliot called *Murder in the Cathedral*, which is about the martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket: “The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason.” King used this line in reference to southern police chiefs who were not, at the time, violently opposing protesters. These chiefs, King contended, thought that maintaining nonviolence was the best way to retain Jim Crow segregation. If those opposing racial discrimination were simply allowed to protest without disruption, the thinking went that they would eventually tire and give up. How wrong these chiefs were. The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom drew between 200,000 and 300,000 protesters. In the summer of 2021, it is estimated that between 15,000,000 and 26,000,000 people protested the unlawful killing of George Floyd.

It is also possible to consider Eliot’s words in relation to King himself. King did, after all, maintain a massive national media presence. He was honored endlessly during his life, even winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Surely, he could have been seduced by the grandeur of his role and fallen victim to the work of the evil spirit. But, as this paper has shown, his words are infused with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and align in countless ways with classic wisdom on the discernment of spirits. King promotes unity. He remained in the present moment. He showed confidence, tranquility, and stability. In thirteen years, he never wavered from the practice of nonviolence.<sup>61</sup> His words in all three works reflect the wisdom of the Christian faith and its witnesses.<sup>62</sup> King suffered and died. With a wife and four kids, walking away from his role and responsibility to the civil rights movement would have been far easier. He could have

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<sup>61</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 18.

<sup>62</sup> Geger, “Rules,” rule 2.

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grown old and written books and lived a comfortable life. But, King was attuned to the Holy Spirit, which called him ever more deeply into the pursuit of racial justice. The Holy Spirit sustained him.

Perhaps words from an entirely different sermon of his might concretize the point. In Chicago, on August 27, 1967, King offered a sermon in which he recalled “an inner voice encouraging him to stand up for righteousness, justice, and truth...the voice of Jesus telling him to fight on and promising never to leave him alone.”<sup>63</sup> He finished his sermon by evoking the Holy Spirit and the well-known spiritual, “There is a Balm in Gilead” - “Yes, sometimes I feel discouraged and feel my work’s in vain. But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.”<sup>64</sup> Surely, King knew the evil spirit pursued him. But he resisted, translating the work of the Holy Spirit in his life into words that will ring out for generations to come.

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<sup>63</sup> Aaron Howard, “The Manifestation of an Immanent God: The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr,” in *Revives my Soul Again: The Spirituality of Martin Luther King, Jr*, eds. Lewis Baldwin and Victor Anderson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 111.

<sup>64</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “The Man Who Was a Fool,” in *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr*, eds. Clayborn Carson and Peter Holloran (New York: Warner, 1998), 163.

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## Appendix: Fifty Classic Rules for the Discernment of Spirits

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|  | <b>Good Spirit</b>   | <b>Bad Spirit</b>  |
|--|--|--|
|  | Light<br>Transparent<br>Clarity  | Darkness<br>Occult, Esoteric<br>Obfuscation  |
|  | Attraction to a community,<br>especially that of the Church.                               | Isolation. Withdrawal.<br><i>"I'm spiritual but not religious."</i>  |
|  | Consistency with the Bible<br>and Catholic doctrine.                                       | Inconsistency with the Bible<br>and Catholic doctrine.   |
|  | Respect for the instructions of<br>legitimate church and secular authorities.              | Disregard or disdain for the instructions of<br>legitimate church and secular authorities.   |
|  | Makes distinctions. Notes details.<br>Makes precise and modest claims.                     | Makes vague and sweeping statements.<br>Speaks in half-truths and clichés.   |
|  | Values the Present   | Romanticizes the past or the future.<br>Continually postpones good intentions.   |
|  | Is pleased to rely on the ordinary means of grace<br>that God provides for all Christians. | Ignores or disdains the ordinary for the sake<br>of the unusual or grandiose.<br><i>"I won't receive the grace that I seek unless<br/>I make a pilgrimage to this faraway shrine."</i> |
|  | Stability<br>Commitment<br>Latin = <i>stabilitas</i>                                       | Wandering<br>Fickleness<br>Latin = <i>horror loci</i> (fear of the place)  |

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|  | <p>Confidence. Peace.<br/>Good humor.</p>   | <p>Fear. Shame. Sadness. Anger.<br/>Depression or Anxiety (if they're not clinical).</p>  |
|  | <p>Humility =<br/>readiness to acknowledge<br/>both one's gifts and virtues,<br/>and one's limitations and failings,<br/>in the right circumstances,<br/>and for the right reasons.</p>   | <p>Pride = does not acknowledge<br/>one's own sins and limitations,<br/>or how one benefitted from others.<br/>-or-<br/>False Humility (Pusillanimity) =<br/>does not acknowledge one's own gifts and duties<br/>when needed. Does not "step up"<br/>for fear of being perceived as vain.</p> |
|  | <p>Empowers others. Delegates authority<br/>and responsibility where appropriate.</p>   | <p>Centralizes authority and tasks<br/>on oneself when not necessary.</p>   |
|  | <p>Seeks the counsel and company<br/>of holy persons.</p>   | <p>Avoids the counsel and company<br/>of holy persons.</p>  |
|  | <p>Acknowledges that one's own<br/>sufferings, sins, and temptations<br/>have been experienced by countless others.</p>   | <p>Acts like one's own sufferings,<br/>sins, and temptations<br/>are unique or unprecedented.</p>   |
|  | <p>Awareness of the unique needs<br/>of individuals.</p>  | <p>Uses the same remedies and approaches<br/>with everyone.</p>   |
|  | <p>Comfortable with silence. Slow to speak.<br/>Reflects before reacts.</p>   | <p>Uncomfortable with silence.<br/>Reactive. Impulsive. Fidgety.</p>  |
|  | <p>Shows a combative spirit against evil,<br/>including against one's temptations.<br/><i>agere contra</i> = Latin, "to act against"<br/><i>antirrhétikos</i> = Greek, "talking back"</p> | <p>Shows timidity or lethargy in the face<br/>of evil or spiritual challenges.<br/>Entertains tempting thoughts<br/>instead of trying to eliminate them.</p>  |
|  | <p>Moderation<br/><i>Caritas Discreta</i></p>   | <p>Extremes<br/><i>Zelus non secundam scientiam</i></p>   |
|  | <p>Principled, loving behavior<br/>whether one is in the mood or not.</p>   | <p>Loving behavior only when<br/>one is in the mood.</p>  |

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|  | Acknowledges the true power and dignity of being a Christian.  | Takes pride in being no one special, "an ordinary person."                                       |
|  | Willingness and even eagerness to suffer when it truly serves God.   | A horror of suffering and sacrifice. Fights to stay in one's comfort zone.                       |
|  | Embraces a simple lifestyle relative to one's Christian vocation and duties.   | Accumulates goods, diversions, and superficial friends. Finicky tastes.                          |
|  | Always seeks greater ways to love and to serve.  | Is content with doing the minimum.   |
|  | Continually seeks to go from good to better in the spiritual life.   | Is content with one's present spiritual state. Desires going back to something less good.        |
|  | Focuses on one's own sinfulness.   | Is preoccupied with the sins of others.  |
|  | Careful attention to small decisions and temptations in the spiritual life...  | <i>"God doesn't care about the small things."<br/>"God has better things to worry about."</i>    |
|  | ... while simultaneously seeing and taking confidence in the bigger picture of God's love and mercy.                   | <i>"How can God possibly love me when I have so many unchaste thoughts every day?"</i>           |
|  | Embraces manual labor when necessary as noble and holy.  | Believes manual labor is unseemly for those who are truly spiritual.                             |
|  | Recognizes spiritual consolations and charismatic gifts as helpful but unessential means to greater faith and charity. | Regards spiritual consolations and charismatic gifts as necessary for greater faith and charity. |
|  | Attracted to edifying topics.  | Attracted to topics that are morbid, disgusting, shameful.                                       |
|  | Recalls graces and struggles of the past to keep the present and future in proper perspective.                         | Forgetfulness of the past.<br>Selective memory.  |

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|  | Appreciates the intelligence and wisdom of earlier peoples, and of other religions and cultures.   | Dismisses earlier peoples as ignorant or superstitious.<br>Dismisses other religions and cultures.   |
|  | Tranquility and even joy at the thought of one's own death.  | Fear of death. Avoidance of the topic.<br>Makes no plans for one's own death.  |
|  | Commitment to the length and difficulty of the spiritual journey.  | Seeks quick fixes in the spiritual life.   |
|  | Emotional responses that are proportionate to the situation.   | Overreacts or underreacts.<br>Nurses grudges. Frivolous laughter.  |
|  | Puts a good interpretation on others' words and deeds whenever reasonably possible.<br><br>Readiness to presume the good-will of others, until given clear evidence otherwise. | Tends to interpret another's words and deeds with suspicion.<br><br><i>"If you don't agree with me, it's because you're a hater."</i>        |
|  | Acknowledges one's own vices and limitations when relevant, and does not get offended when others note them also.  | Speaks frequently of one's own vices and limitations, but gets offended when others note them also.  |
|  | Rejoices in the successes and gifts of others, and points others to them.  | Is stingy with giving praise.<br>Gets jealous or depressed when others are praised for their gifts and talents.                              |
|  | When making truth claims, one appeals to reason and to consistency with the best of the Christian tradition.   | When making truth claims, one appeals to private, interior certainty.  |
|  | Distinguishes personal preferences from value judgments.<br><br><i>"I don't like this kind of church music, but I appreciate that some people do."</i>                         | Conflates personal preferences and value judgments.<br><br><i>"I don't like this kind of church music, therefore it's bad church music."</i> |

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|  | <p>Recognizes ambiguities where appropriate.</p> <p><i>Christians sometimes can legitimately disagree about the correct response to a problem.</i></p> <p><i>The Gospel resists being reduced to a single truth or value.</i></p> | <p>False reductionism. False simplicity.</p> <p><i>There is only one Christian answer to a moral question, it is obvious to anyone who has real faith, and all other responses are evil.</i></p> <p><i>The essence of the Gospel is one particular truth or value, and if you do not prioritize it too, then you do not understand what it means to be Christian.</i></p> |
|  | <p>Hears criticism and suggestions graciously, without getting defensive or depressed.</p>  | <p>Bristles when someone offers criticism and suggestions. Tries to silence the speaker by pointing out their own flaws.</p>  |
|  | <p>Considers the context of a situation before speaking and acting.</p>   | <p>Speaks and acts the same way without regard for context.</p>   |
|  | <p>Recognizes that not all sources of information are equally credible.</p>   | <p>Gullibility. Fails to consider the source of the information.</p>  |
|  | <p>When one's views are challenged, one is able to concede some points while pushing back on other points.</p>  | <p>When one's views are challenged, one either concedes everything, or resists any concessions at all.</p>  |
|  | <p>A person directs their anger, frustration, etc., in the appropriate direction.</p> <p><i>"I am frustrated with God and I trust Him enough to tell Him so, while remaining reverent and faithful."</i></p>                      | <p>A person directs their anger, frustration, etc., onto an inappropriate target.</p> <p><i>I'm in financial straits and afraid for the future; and I blame undocumented immigrants for this.</i></p>   |
|  | <p>Authenticity. A person acts consistently with what they profess.</p>   | <p>Hypocrisy. A person acts inconsistently with what they profess.</p>  |
|  | <p>If a person is in a good spiritual state, and an idea or desire occurs to them that seems gentle, sweet, and consistent with their present spiritual mood, like a drop of water falling onto a sponge.</p>                     | <p>If a person is in a good spiritual state, and an idea or desire occurs to them that disturbs them sharply and severely, like a stone dropping onto the surface of a calm pond.</p>   |



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|  | <p style="text-align: center;">A person trusts that God will draw good from their bad discernments and decisions when those were sincere attempts to serve God better.</p>   | <p style="text-align: center;">A person is so afraid of making mistakes in the service of God that they refuse to make a choice or commitment.</p>  |
|  | <p style="text-align: center;">A person talks about their own temptations and mistakes as opportunities for spiritual growth and greater self-knowledge.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">A person rejoices in the fact that they are a sinner loved by God.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">A person continually talks about old mistakes and sins, and past and present temptations, as if they were personal failures.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">A person refuses to let go of their earlier mistakes and sins.</p> |
|  | <p style="text-align: center;">Emotional equilibrium.</p>  | <p style="text-align: center;">Mood swings<br/>(when they're not clinical).</p>   |