

This past week, many of our nation's leaders along with civil rights advocates commemorated the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Most of us recall or have since learned how he died. On April 4, 1968, James Earl Ray assassinated King at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. He was merely 39 years old.

Like King, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer died at 39. He was executed by the Nazis on April 9, 1945 for his involvement in a plot to kill Adolf Hitler.

While time and circumstance separated King and Bonhoeffer, they died for at least several overlapping reasons: both mixed politics with religion, both condemned state-sanctioned racism, and both recognized the complicity of the Christian church insofar as its most dominant forms did nothing in response.

Truth to Power

King's witness is especially powerful.

In one of his most famous writings, he chastises a group of white religious leaders from the South who issued a public statement calling for an end to protests against segregation occurring in Birmingham, Alabama. "I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time," King responds, "but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative."

King's words raise a difficult question: if leaders of what we might call the "religious white" (a play on words I'm using in place of religious right) challenged his methods of reform, what would they say about Jesus? Did he possess any concern regarding the social conditions of the oppressed among his contemporaries, or was his kingdom "not of this world," as he tells Pontius Pilate according to the Gospel of John? Did his admonition to "turn the other cheek" imply submission to what Paul calls the "powers and principalities" of this world, or did the good news of God's emerging kingdom which Jesus preaches in Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain revolutionary implications.

In short, was Jesus political?

Stay Away from Politics

It's not an easy question to ask – and with good reason.

If a pastor endorses a candidate for public office in a sermon, it would potentially jeopardize the tax-exempt status of his or her congregation. Talking about politics from

the pulpit also risks alienating members of the congregation who hold contrary political views.

That said, no law dictates that one must refrain from addressing political topics as such from the pulpit. Think of how often, for example, conservative pastors condemn women's reproductive rights from the pulpit. In more progressive churches, on the other hand, the pastor may preach about increasing opportunities for immigration as a biblical mandate.

Both are inescapably political.

For my part, while I constantly stress in my sermons certain values of the Christian faith, especially loving your neighbor as yourself, I believe you should be the one to draw your own conclusions. All of us should have the freedom to form our own views and think for ourselves.

Now don't get me wrong. I may totally disagree with your conclusions! But it's not my place to tell you what they should be from the pulpit. That is something for you to decide.

In what follows, I have no intention of "solving" the question of whether Jesus was political. Instead, I invite you to be part of a process where we wrestle with this together. What evidence do we have in Scripture to affirm or deny the political aims of Jesus, and more importantly why would it matter?

The Gospel of Luke

Since our Gospel reading today comes from Luke, let's focus briefly on what the physician-turned-historian states or implies about the political nature of Jesus' ministry and teachings.

Luke was written sometime during the 80's of the first century. He bases his narrative in part on Mark's Gospel, which appeared roughly a decade before, fresh with memories of the Emperor Nero and his persecution of Jesus-followers. Indeed, the original conclusion of Mark's Gospel (16:8) ends so abruptly that some believe the author himself was martyred for his faith.

Strangely enough, however, Mark blamed what was clearly a political response by the Roman government to the perceived threat of Jesus' teachings (i.e., his crucifixion) on the religious authorities of the day, the elders and scribes of the Jews living in Judea. Matthew, incidentally, makes it worse by blaming the Jews as such. "His blood be on us and our children," the people respond when Pilate asks if they wish to acquit him (27:25), a line that has contributed to anti-Jewish Christian sentiment for centuries.

While Luke (thankfully) does not simply blame "the Jews" for Jesus' death, he doubles-down on Mark's claim. As the New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman observes, "His narrative goes to some lengths to show that Jesus was executed by the state only

because Pilate's hand was forced by the leaders of the Jews" (*A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 101). Here, Pilate not only declares Jesus' innocence multiple times; the Roman centurion confirms it upon his death.

"Truly," he says, "this man was innocent."

If Jesus' ministry was perceived by the civil authorities as a threat to the social order, hence his execution, why do Mark and Luke go to "some lengths" to exonerate the Romans and suppress or mute the political motive underlying his death? The most convincing explanation I know is this: neither Mark nor Luke wanted to draw the attention of Rome, particularly as Jesus' followers were already being questioned and persecuted by the authorities.

Their depiction of Pilate, who absolves himself of any responsibility, was, in short, a strategy for survival. Christians did not pose a threat to the state.

That said, the political nature of Jesus' ministry shines more clearly through Luke's Gospel than any of the other three. Consider, for example, how he presents Pilate as a "weak administrator" who ultimately "bows down to pressure from his subjects" (*ibid.*). This suggests that Luke may not have been written as an "apology" or defense of Christianity for imperial consumption. Instead, Ehrman concludes, "Luke's aim may have been to show Christians themselves that their movement has been nonviolent and socially respectable from the very beginning, thus perhaps providing them with answers they needed when confronted by the objections of outsiders" (*ibid.*, p. 102).

Luke, in other words, was a survival manual for Christians in the face of persecution (as is arguably Paul's admonition to submit to governmental authorities in Romans 13:1-7). That, however, did not compel the evangelist to erase entirely the political aims of Jesus' ministry. Our Gospel reading for today, is a prime example.

In the Beginning

In Luke 4, Jesus says nothing about submitting to worldly powers, or about how we should focus on saving souls or about the need for a "personal relationship" with him. Instead, as the first act of his public ministry, he reads some of the most politically charged words from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

The effect is not lost on James Cone, the architect of black liberation theology in America. "Black liberation theology," he explains, "was created by black theologians and teachers who rejected [the] white teaching about the meek, long-suffering Jesus. We called it hypocritical and racist. Our [view of Jesus] focused on the revolutionary Black Christ who 'preached good news to the poor,' 'proclaimed release to the captives,' and 'let the oppressed go free'" (*God of the Oppressed*, p. xvi).

White Christians had been proclaiming the Hallmark version of Jesus “to their own advantage,” as my friend Yvonne Stokes recently told me. King knew it and Cone knew it, which illustrates why both insisted the gospel has political implications.

In Luke, however, the implications occasionally become overt. When Jesus, for example, applies what he read from Isaiah to himself before everyone in the synagogue, the political nature of his words is abundantly clear no matter how much leaders of the religious white spiritualize them for the sake of maintaining their power (e.g., by insisting that “the oppressed” refers to our spiritual captivity rather than our social, political, or economic situation).

Notice as well what Jesus says regarding the duration of his ministry in the passage he reads from Isaiah. Most of us assume he taught, healed, and preached for three years. Luke 4:19, however, indicates that Jesus intends to proclaim “the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Pause here for a moment. Could the year in question be what Leviticus 25 refers to as a “Jubilee Year,” one where all Jews are mandated to forgive the debts of their brothers and sisters? Is this not what Jesus confirms later in Luke’s Gospel when he teaches his disciples to pray by saying “forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (11:4; italics mine)?

This sounds to me like the redistribution of wealth! What could be more political? What could be more revolutionary?

Putting Jesus’ Politics into Perspective

Ample amounts of additional evidence regarding the political nature of Jesus’ ministry, however muted, exist in Luke. As my friend Doug Oakman writes in *The Political Aims of Jesus*, “Luke has the most accurate recollections of Jesus’ political intentions. The . . . inaugural sermon of Jesus at Nazareth, only in Luke (4:16-30), links his work to the prophecy of Isaiah 61. Only Luke includes the woes of dishonor to the wealthy (Luke 6:24-26). Luke includes [source] material about subsistence anxiety and the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-34). As noted in chapter 4, in Luke, Jesus is expressly accused of tax evasion (Luke 23:2)” (p. 126).

We should likewise note evidence, however briefly, concerning the political nature of Jesus’ ministry and teaching in Paul’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper, one to which all people – rich or poor, slave or free, Jew or Greek, and male or female – are welcome. Imagine how revolutionary that teaching and practice could have been in the context of segregation. There perhaps King would have added “black or white” to Paul’s list, just as Bonhoeffer would have added “German or Jew.”

There is still more. “Jesus also had one later disciple who kept substantial political faith in him,” says Oakman. “Perhaps no stronger critique of Rome in ancient literature

could be found than in the prophecy of John's Revelation. John's reference to Jesus' [life and teaching] is very brief: he gave 'faithful witness' against Rome and that cost him his life. This blood ransom of Jesus is liberating for others – that is, they too will give faithful witness against Rome unto death (Rev. 1:5, 5:9)" (ibid., pp. 127-128).

Jesus, in short, political elements of Jesus' ministry certainly exist. While some of the New Testament writings suppress them, others – Luke, Revelation, 1 Corinthians – let their light shine through.

How, then, do we interpret the political implications of Jesus' ministry for ourselves and our congregation today?

A Common Agreement

While I leave whatever conclusions may be drawn to each of you, there are a few lessons from today's message upon which I believe all of us as Christians can agree.

First, we can be aware of the tendency of the religious white to spiritualize Jesus' teachings. Let us rather let Jesus speak for himself. When he blesses the poor and the hungry as the real beneficiaries of God's emerging upside-down kingdom, let's take him literally at his word instead of softening what he says by speaking of spiritual hunger or poverty (the way Matthew does).

Next, let us be quick to recognize the hidden political motives of those who reject the political Jesus as a figment, say, of the communist imagination. Who benefits from conveying a picture of Christ as totally submissive to His father as well as the circumstances around him as expressive of God's will? Cone and King knew the answer. Do we?

Third and finally, let's explore ways to push back against the "principalities and powers" of our time, drawing on our concern for equality from our experience of the Lord's Supper or from clues we find in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. These values belong neither to Democrats nor to Republicans. They belong to us as Christians, and it is from them that Jesus calls us to act.

This past week, many of our nation's leaders along with civil rights advocates commemorated the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. May we as Christians commemorate him by recognizing as he did the gospel of liberation in all its forms – spiritual, economic, social, and political.

Amen.