

The Birth of a Leader: Sermonic Discourse in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Address at Holt Street
Baptist Church

A Senior Project Presented to
The Faculty of the Communication Studies Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

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INTRODUCTION

On the evening of December 5, 1955, thousands of African American citizens flocked to Holt Street Baptist Church to discuss a proposed bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. The fortunate few who had arrived early filled the sanctuary pews and crowded the basement until both rooms reached maximum capacity, while the rest of the crowd assembled on the surrounding streets. Something was stirring within this state, throughout the African American community of this city, and in the very hearts and souls of the black men and women who yearned to be given the same rights as their white neighbors. On that night, a man arrived, pushing his way through the masses, carrying with him little more than a note of scribbled thoughts. This man was the meeting's keynote speaker, the Montgomery Improvement Association's newly elected president, and the African American people's long-awaited liberator who had come to set the captives free. His name was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

It is difficult to imagine the energy and excitement that must have filled the church and engulfed its gatherers—both the few who found a seat inside and the thousands that swarmed around it. Yet not a single audience member could have foreseen the significance of this night and its implications for equality in America except for Martin Luther King himself, who told his friend as he was being dropped off: “You know something, Finley, this could turn into something big” (Branch 138). The people were about to witness the rise of a movement and the birth of a leader that would forever change their nation. Although the address was not the most eloquent of King's career, it marked the beginning of his leadership role as a civil rights activist and unveiled his elusive political rhetoric that helped shape the course of American history.

At the time, King had already been obediently fulfilling his first calling—that of a preacher—for over a year at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Although he was young, King had ample amount of ministry experience, due in part to his upbringing: observations both at home and in church, as well as extensive seminary education, shaped him into a gifted and dynamic Gospel preacher. At the age of twenty-five, he accepted the role of shepherding his flock toward growth in God and fellowship with one another, and he did this with great integrity and faith. Certainly, King was well aware of his first calling.

However, when studying the sermons and speeches of King, it is difficult to separate his two distinct leadership roles. Throughout his life, King’s sermons reflected the mood and status of the Civil Rights Movement, while his political speeches flowed with biblical imagery, religious dialogue, and spiritual references. As the movement carried on, King’s political rhetoric became increasingly intertwined with his style of homiletics to the point where today, in hindsight, distinguishing the influences of his speeches on his sermons and his sermons on his speeches is a challenging task. Keith D. Miller summarizes this phenomenon well: “Unlike white religious leaders, [King] preached by protesting, protested by preaching, and wrote theology by stepping into a jail cell. His successful theology consists of his sermons, speeches, civil rights essays, and political career—not his formal theological work” (162).

This observation elicits a question that is worth investigating: who was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? Was he a civil rights preacher or a preaching civil rights leader? Perhaps the answer to truly discovering who the leader we celebrate today is can be uncovered by analyzing King’s first-ever public address—a speech that is both overlooked and understudied. The impact of the preliminary Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)

meeting on that December night in 1955 will never fully be measured; what is evident, though, is that the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott “resulted in: the desegregation of the city’s bus line; imitative movements across the South; a new civil rights organization (the Southern Christian Leadership Conference); [and] a charismatic, national civil rights leader (Dr. King)” (Wilson 300).

In addition to political achievements, the Holt Street Address transformed King in a profoundly spiritual way. In his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, which documents the formation, implementation, and success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King writes:

As I sat listening to the continued applause I realized that this speech had evoked more response than any speech or sermon I had ever delivered, and yet it was virtually unprepared. I came to see for the first time what the older preachers meant when they said, ‘Open your mouth and God will speak for you.’ While I would not let this experience tempt me to overlook the need for continued preparation, it would always remind me that God can transform man’s weakness into his glorious opportunity (49).

As a result of his speech, King gained the assurance to preach from what seemed to be a divine ordinance. This night became a turning point in the young pastor’s career, evidently suggesting that the occasion had as much to with him fulfilling his role as preacher as it did with him emerging as a civil rights leader.

The Holt Street Address forever shaped King as a Christian leader of his church and a secular leader of the African American community. Of greater importance, though, is discovering how this speech helped shape the rhetoric that he implemented to persuade the community toward loving yet demanding action. The address at Holt Street exemplifies the

sermonic discourse that King would eventually adapt as a model to use in his future political speeches because it displays the identification of core communal values, structures a values hierarchy, and performs communal existence.

In the following work I will begin by depicting the circumstances that encompassed King's speech, including the events that preceded the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the formation of the Montgomery Improvement Association, and King's increased involvement in all of it. I will then describe the evolution of and theoretical foundations for generic criticism, which is the mode of analysis this essay employs. Through rhetorical analysis I will then apply the sermonic discourse genre to King's speech by using the specific requirements as outlined by Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites and determine to what degree the piece exemplifies the sermonic function of rhetoric. Finally, I will conclude with the implications of my findings in light of their contributions to rhetorical practice and theory.

BACKGROUND OF THE ADDRESS

The message at the first Montgomery Improvement Association meeting cannot be fully understood without studying the events that preceded it. The origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which was officially implemented on the day of the address, trace back to the spring of 1955. Far before Rosa Parks, a young fifteen-year-old black girl named Claudette Colvin was forcefully removed from a bus and arrested for her refusal to give up her seat to white passengers. Although this incident has been hidden in the shadows of the Parks trial, some have cast light upon it by accentuating its impact, including King himself. He recognized this event's significance by writing, "The long repressed feelings of resentment on the part of the Negroes had begun to stir. The fear and apathy which had for so long cast a shadow on the life of the Negro community were gradually fading before a new spirit of

courage and self-respect” (*Stride* 31). Although it would be months before further action was taken, Colvin’s civil disobedience stirred those whose hearts were weary and disillusioned.

On Thursday evening, December 1, Rosa Parks left a department store after a long day of work to head home on one of the city’s bus lines. When the bus became full, she was told to move toward the back in order to accompany a standing white passenger, and when she respectfully refused to do so, the driver had her removed and arrested on the spot (Hare). This deliberate action taken by Mrs. Parks set into motion the plans for a citywide bus boycott.

E.D. Nixon, a well-known and respected civil rights leader in Montgomery, arrived at the local police station where Parks was being held shortly after catching wind of her arrest. It was common for him to receive these types of calls; in fact, it was part of his regular duties. But when he arrived to pay for Parks’ bail, he knew this was a special case. He and other leaders in the community had been patiently searching for a scenario that would lay the foundation for their attack against segregation. After consulting with several other organizers, he became convinced that Parks was the ideal candidate for the black community to support. He knew that Parks “was without peer as a potential symbol for Montgomery’s Negroes—humble enough to be claimed by the common folk, and yet dignified enough in manner, speech, and dress to command the respect of the leading classes” (Branch 130). Nixon also knew that if her arrest was to trigger something greater than the arrest itself, then further action must be taken immediately.

The next morning, Nixon began making calls to local pastors in the area, knowing that a mass protest stood no chance without the unified support of Montgomery’s church leaders (Garrow 17). Meanwhile, Martin Luther King awoke to a call by an enthusiastic Nixon on the other end of the line asking for his involvement of the proposed bus boycott, which was

scheduled to begin the following Monday. With great hesitation, King ended the conversation unsure if he could handle the extra work at the time but promising Nixon he would at least consider it with his wife. Before he could put thought to it, though, he received another call, this time from one of his closest friends: the Reverend Ralph Abernathy.

Abernathy, the minister of Montgomery's First Baptist Church during the bus boycott, was best known for his ability to preach "with empathy, humor, and a powerful rhythmic partnership with his audience" (Lischer 256). His style, which contrasted that of King's in almost every manner, allowed for the two to harmoniously fuse their message at mass meetings into a singular, cohesive and potent rhetoric. In his reflections on the boycott, King refers to Reverend Abernathy as "one of the central figures in the protest," as well as one of his "closest associates" (34). In their conversation that morning, Abernathy wasted no time in explaining the magnitude of this prospective movement and its implications for victory on the political and civil rights front. Thanks to Abernathy's appeal, King finally conceded to support the effort, "so long as he did not have to do the organizational work" (Garrow 18). A meeting was set for that evening at King's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

Over fifty black leaders in the community gathered to discuss Nixon's plans for the initial implementation of the bus boycott. After settling disagreements, the group finally decided to endorse the Monday boycott as well as hold a mass meeting that night. A leaflet that had been drafted the previous night by Women's Political Council member Jo Ann Robinson was used to create an updated newsletter with additional information regarding the Monday evening meeting (Garrow 19). Over the weekend, reporter Joe Azbell of the *Montgomery Advertiser* wrote an article about the proposed bus boycott, saying, "A 'top secret' meeting of Montgomery Negroes who plan a boycott of city buses Monday is

scheduled at 7 P.M. at the Holt Street Baptist Church..." (Azbell). Much to Nixon's delight, the article provided additional advertising for the movement, and between it and the circulating leaflets, news about the boycott spread quickly.

On the morning of December 5, Martin Luther King witnessed bus after bus pass by his house without a single black passenger on it. The people had heard the news and were joyfully responding to the task at hand. That afternoon, the leaders reassembled to discuss the plan for the evening's first meeting. They also thought it would be wise to create an official organization for the Montgomery Bus Boycott that was now underway. As the time came to elect the president, Rufus Lewis stood and boldly suggested his own pastor, the Reverend King, to fill the role, and was immediately seconded by another member. After several moments of silence without any other nominees, the spotlight turned to King, who responded humbly, "Well, if you think I can render some service, I will" (Garrow 22). All other positions were filled and Abernathy's suggested name of the organization was passed: the Montgomery Improvement Association was in full effect.

King raced home to tell his wife about all that had happened and began hastily preparing for his address that night. In the brief twenty minutes he could afford, King remembered how unqualified he felt to lead this movement: "I was now almost overcome, obsessed by a feeling of inadequacy ... With nothing left but faith in a power whose matchless strength stands over against the frailties and inadequacies of human nature, I turned to God in prayer" (*Stride* 46). Furthermore, King was faced with establishing the nature of the movement: both the mindset its participants and the behavior they would demonstrate to their hostile, unforgiving white audience. In this moment, King asked himself how he would lead,

persuade, and ultimately entrust his followers with a rhetoric that had the power to change a nation:

How could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds? I knew that many of the Negro people were victims of bitterness that could easily rise to flood proportions. What could I say to keep them courageous and prepared for positive action and yet devoid of hate and resentment? Could the militant and the moderate be combined in a single speech? (*Stride* 46).

These self-reflections hold the key to discovering the core of King's powerful rhetoric. In the waning minutes before he left, King forged the language that so eloquently blended his passion for social justice with his convictions behind the pulpit. It was this voice—the one that urgently demanded, “From every mountaintop, let freedom ring,” during the March on Washington (King, “I Have a Dream”); and the one that calmly wrote, “Injustice anywhere is threat to justice everywhere,” from a jail cell in Birmingham (King, “Letter”); and the one that prophetically uttered, “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming Lord,” the night before his assassination (King, “I’ve Been”)—this same voice was the one that was to be debuted the night of Monday, December 5, 1955 during the MIA's first mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church.

DESCRIPTION OF METHOD

The study of genres dates back to Aristotle's classifications of rhetoric into deliberative, epideictic, and forensic subcategories. However, within the past century rhetorical criticism has been distinguished as a unique discipline from that of literary

criticism, which has stirred rhetoricians and scholars alike to construct various methods of rhetorical analysis. Before long, it became evident that both the orators and their oratory were influenced by that which preceded them. Therefore, to study rhetoric meant necessarily studying the external elements that encompassed each artifact. Leland Griffin illuminated this notion by lobbying for expansive research into the historical movements and influences that surrounded rhetorical acts. He wrote:

The recommendation has been made, for example, that we pay somewhat less attention to the single speaker and more to speakers—that we turn our attention from the individual ‘great orator’ and undertake the research into such selected acts and atmospheres of public address as would permit the study of a multiplicity of speakers, speeches, audiences, and occasions (184).

Edwin Black and Lloyd Bitzer expanded upon Griffin’s assertions and constructed the groundwork of generic criticism. In his 1965 book *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*, Black rejected the limited “Neo-Aristotelian” model in favor of an approach that emphasized specific genres. Black’s work proved to be revolutionary in the field of rhetorical criticism, as an outburst in studies of specific genres during the late 1960s ensued. Likewise, Bitzer’s work on inventing and labeling the “rhetorical situation” validated the utility and importance of generic criticism. He argues, “From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established” (13). Thus, in Bitzer’s opinion, the situation is the precursor to any and all acts of rhetoric: “It is the situation which calls the discourse into existence” (2).

In the most elementary sense, a genre can be classified as a “category” or “generalization”; thus, in regards to analyzing discourse, “as genre and criticism are productive of useful understanding of things, they perform their highest function” (Fisher 291). Of the entire collection of work that embodies generic criticism today, the most comprehensive definition of “genre” is provided by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. In their 1978 article “Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: an Introduction”, they write, “‘Genre’ is a classification based on the fusion and interrelation of elements in such a way that a unique kind of rhetorical act is created” (Burghardt 457). According to their understanding, the situation systematically produces the product of discourse.

Campbell and Jamieson expand upon their definition by contending that generic criticism “is taken as a means toward systematic, close textual analysis,” contains “substantive, situational, and stylistic elements,” and “reveals both the conventions and affinities that a work shares with others” (451). Since the nature of rhetoric is quite often polysemic, the multi-faceted approach that a generic perspective offers is an indispensable resource for uncovering different levels of meaning within any given work (457). These scholars present a case for the utility of exploring the brand of a rhetor’s discourse.

In light of the impact that a generic perspective has on rhetoric, one can understand the value of applying this type of criticism to the great leaders of our nation and the discourse that swayed its audience. Certainly, these rhetors drew upon the successes of their predecessors and demands of the moment to formulate their discourse to some degree. These propositions are worth investigating, and the work of many rhetoricians has revealed this.

Communication scholars Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites have devoted their efforts specifically to the rhetoric used by the Reverend King in their book *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*. This work features a synthesis of criticisms from well-known contributors that focus on the dynamic rhetoric Dr. King employed in the public sphere of his vocation.

Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites posit the notion that King performed a sermonic function of rhetoric that saturated his public discourse. This function is comprised of three processes, which were in part adapted from the ideas of previous rhetoricians studying epideictic (Condit). The three processes include:

1. Identifying and defining core communal values;
2. Structuring a hierarchy of values; and
3. Performing communal existence.

The rhetorician who can effectively identify core communal values establishes common ground with an audience and can proceed to motivate them to unity and action (Calloway-Thomas & Lucaites 4). Structuring a hierarchy of values is initiated by the community to whom the rhetor speaks; they evaluate their own beliefs as they are currently ordered within the community and provide a platform for the speaker to put the values into effective action (5). Finally, communal existence is performed when the speaker and audience merge by unity in belief and action to become one. It is executed when the speaker presents the audience with a clear picture of the values of their community, and the audience members in turn embrace it as their identity (5-6).

Acknowledging that King was “first and foremost a preacher, a giver of sermons,” Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites argue, “Whether speaking before his congregation on Sunday

morning, writing a public letter, or giving an interview to the representatives of the mass media, [King] was sermonizing, actively striving to craft what he called a ‘beloved community’ from the key values of the Christian and democratic traditions of American society” (2). This community that King valiantly pursued and ultimately gave his life for permeated throughout his entire civil rights career and “changed as King recognized and adapted to the social and political exigencies of time and place” (2). The beloved community that King so passionately advocated was the driving force that enhanced shared experience and affected change throughout the movement. It is this sermonic function of rhetoric that will be applied to King’s debut speech at Holt Street Baptist Church in the following sections.

SERMONIC STYLE OF THE MASS MEETING

A proper evaluation of sermonic discourse cannot be assessed to the Holt Street Address without a discussion of the style and context in which it was given. Thus, I begin with an overview of the format of the meeting that took place. Although this topic does not confirm whether the speech serves a sermonic function, it is nevertheless essential in forming an understanding of the setting in which King’s words were spoken.

If the origins of the Civil Rights Movement are found in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, then the Holt Street Address on December 5, 1955 marks the beginning of the movement’s most powerful device: the mass meeting. These gatherings, which spread throughout the South as the movement grew, became the soundboard for all information, updates, and sentiments that African American leaders wanted to pass on to their followers. Although they were held to unite the community on the movement’s progress, they closely resembled the African American Church in style, form, and content, and consequently, the attendees oftentimes treated them as church services. Richard Lischer theorizes that this

phenomenon is due in part to the nature of the African American tradition. He writes, “The mass meeting *felt* like church to the people ... because their common theological tradition had taught them not to distinguish between salvation in the church and freedom in the city” (266).

On the day of the address, Montgomery’s black leaders congregated to formally establish the Montgomery Improvement Association and plan out that evening’s mass meeting. The committee settled with an itinerary that nearly mirrored that of a Sunday morning church service. That night’s gathering opened with the singing of two hymns—“Onward Christian Soldiers” and “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”—, a prayer by the Reverend W.F. Alford, and a reading of the 34th Psalm in the Bible by the Reverend Uriah Fields; all this took place before King got up to give his address (Carson 71). After he had finished, the Reverend Edgar N. French introduced Rosa Parks and Fred Daniel to the crowd, Ralph Abernathy read the guidelines of the proposed bus boycott, and the audience voted unanimously in favor of it. Finally, King urged everyone to contribute what he or she could to offset the basic costs of the MIA meeting—an offering, of sorts—before heading out to another speaking engagement (Carson 78).

The first MIA meeting at Holt Street set the stage for the rest of the Civil Rights Movement and due to its success, it served as a blueprint for what future gatherings would look like. Lischer highlights its impact by stating: “From that night forward, King and the black church community forged an interpretive partnership in which they read the Bible, recited it, sang it, performed it, Amen-ed it, and otherwise celebrated the birth of Freedom by its sacred light” (198). Thus, the mass meeting became the pulse of the movement, carrying it forward through praise and persecution. On this stage, the longing for political justice fused with the freedom of religious celebration to create a unifying, coherent form of rhetoric.

SERMONIC DISCOURSE IN THE ADDRESS

The mass meeting was officially implemented as a forum for opinions and ideas of the African American community to transform into political action. Its layout and structure reflected the African American Christian tradition. However, this does not inform us about the rhetoric employed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., nor does it reflect the degree of its effectiveness. For a complete understanding of King's political rhetoric, I now turn to his own words to determine whether or not the Holt Street Address can be labeled as sermonic discourse.

Identifying and Defining Core Communal Values

Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites contend that identifying and defining the highest values of a community is the first step for all speakers who wish invoke the sermonic function of rhetoric. In essence, the success of a speaker hinges on his or her ability to establish credibility with the audience by personally identifying with them and their most cherished beliefs. As the twenty-six-year-old King stepped on stage, his attention was undoubtedly fixed upon this very issue. His seminary training at Morehouse, Crozer, and Boston had thoroughly taught him to adapt to his audience's demands, and his pastoral position at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church provided him with many opportunities to put his education into action. But this night was not Sunday morning, this speech was not a sermon, and this audience desired more than a pithy exegesis of Biblical text. Furthermore, at this time in his career the Reverend King was virtually unknown in the African American community. Not only did he need to motivate a community toward nonviolent action, but he also had to prove himself a worthy leader to bear the burdens of the Civil Rights Movement. The Holt Street Address was his first chance to do so.

“My friends,” King begins, “we are certainly very happy to see each of you out this evening.” Here, as well as several other times in his speech, King stoops down to eye-level with his audience by calling them his friends. Although King was not well known outside Montgomery’s city limits, he immediately identified himself as just another member in the crowd, willing to fight alongside his brothers and sisters for equality. He continues his introduction by saying: “We are here in a general sense because first and foremost *we* are American citizens and we are determined to apply *our* citizenship to the fullness of its meaning” [italics added]. Again, King reinforces his position with the crowd as being equal in status and citizenship as well as eligible to participate in protesting against the local public transportation laws. Without delay, King quickly identifies himself as a fellow brother, friend, and African American citizen to his gatherers.

After identifying with the audience, the next maneuver in sermonic discourse is to classify and help define the audience’s sacred values and beliefs. King does so by appealing to three common themes in the African American tradition: the demand for equality in citizenship, the importance of remembering past hardships, and the celebration of the Christian religion.

Growing up in the segregation-infested South, Martin Luther King received firsthand exposure to racial injustice. He, along with the entire black community, grew tired of being mistreated and demanded the right to American citizenship and all that it entailed. He voices this concern throughout his speech and his audience responds with jubilation. “We are here also because of our love for democracy, because of our deep-seated belief that democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government on earth.” Later, King reassures his audience that the actions demanded of them in order to participate in

the bus boycott reflect the greatest quality of America's democracy: "...The great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right." A few lines later, he restates the purpose of their gathering: "We only assemble here because of our desire to see right exist [*applause*]. My friends, I want it to be known that we're going to work with grim and bold determination to gain justice on the buses of this city [*applause*]." By uttering these phrases, King tactfully embraces the rights of all citizens found in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution instead of shying away from the controversial issues that protests and boycotts would naturally create as they threatened the existing status quo.

Another sacred value King alludes to is the memory of past hardships. At the African American tradition's core lies the strength and willpower of a people to overcome the evil institution of slavery and its numerous repercussions. The black community responded to these memories because they reminded the people of who they once were and the freedom they desired to obtain. To be black in the 1950s meant bearing the yoke of institutionalized racism and remembering the burdens your ancestors bore before you. King cleverly evokes his audience's collective memory during the Holt Street Address when he appeals to their fatigued spirits:

And you know, my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression [*thundering applause*]. There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November. There comes a time [*applause continues*].

This poetic utterance is replete with rhetorical devices, such as repetition and metaphor, which would later become a staple of King's speeches. The people desire for their past not be forgotten but rather used as a catalyst to stir up action, and Dr. King demonstrates his awareness of this.

Finally, King exhorts his audience by strumming on the chords of their innermost being. With spiritual references that would have been undeniably recognized as adaptations from the Bible, he identifies himself with the crowd as a brother of the Christian faith and a purveyor of the Gospel message. Yet, his Biblical remarks go a step further in that they align with the Black preaching style that the gatherers would have certainly been familiar with. Henry Mitchell, a well known twentieth century African American preacher, produced a comprehensive outline of Black sermons and preaching in regards to format, voice, context, and language in his book *Black Preaching*. Mitchell highlights the importance for the preacher's imagination to take hold of passages and add his own flare to it:

There is a great need for more vivid but no less valid details often not given in the Bible or anywhere else, to help the hearer to be caught up in the experience being narrated, and as a result to understand better and to be moved to change. Black preaching, at its best, is rich in the imaginative supply of these details and in their dramatic use in telling the gospel stories (121).

Just before his conclusion, King both encourages and warns the crowd that God is on their side and that He must be obeyed above all else. He declares: "The Almighty God himself is not the ... God just standing out saying through Hosea, 'I love you, Israel.' He's also the God that stands up before the nations and said: 'Be still and know that I'm God, that if you don't obey me I will break the backbone of your power and slap you out of the orbits of your

international and national relationships.” Here, King employs the strategy that Mitchell spoke of. He merges two verses—Hosea 11:1 and the first half of Psalm 46:10—into one, and adds his own imagery to enhance the interpretation of the passages’ meaning and to persuade the crowd to act upon it.

When King approached the pulpit that night, he had in mind the moral standards to which his audience would respond. He was also aware that if he did not summon these sacred values, there would be no way he could convince them to participate in the boycott. So he strategically tailored his address to the demands of his audience and, in doing so, identified himself with the people listening and defined their most cherished beliefs.

Structuring a Values Hierarchy

The second phase of sermonic discourse, according to Calloway-Thomas and Lucaites, is the formation of a values hierarchy. This process starts with the community members, who are free to “consider the range of creative possibilities available for collective action by calling attention to the prevailing order of values.” Only after this is done can they then “[provide] a public space in which rhetors can envision particular and plausible ways of affecting community’s value hierarchy” (5). Concerning the former statement, there is a lack of information available to adequately evaluate the community’s performance. To critique King’s success on creating a public space to enact his people’s values, I turn to his own words found in the address.

Once he unveiled several ideals that were upheld as sacred, King now had his audience moving alongside him. But how could he put these values into action? The answer was by keeping Christian love at the core of his audience’s identity. After exciting the crowd with rich imagery, metaphoric language, and brilliant word repetition, the Reverend King

drew them back in by depicting the legacy he hoped they would leave. “I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are Christian people [*applause*]. We believe in the Christian religion. We believe in the teachings of Jesus. The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest.” A few sentences later, King demands that his followers fear God above all else. “May I say to you my friends, as I come to a close, and just giving some idea of why we are assembled here, that we must ... keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all of our actions.” Despite the rising tension that the boycott was already producing, Christianity was to remain at the pinnacle of their identity. And despite the temptation to counteract oppression with aggression and violence, King urged his audience to be exemplary Christians by acting in love while thirsting for justice.

Thus marks the beginning of King’s most revered piece of rhetorical handiwork: the “beloved community.” King dreamed of the United States one day evolving into a fully integrated society, where color barriers were destroyed and equal opportunities were available to all people. Ira G. Zepp, who has analyzed much of Dr. King’s work by tracing its origins and influences, writes, “King’s vision of the beloved community included all races, all classes, all religions, all ethnic groups, and ultimately all nations. The community transcended economic, social, political, and cultural lines” (214). With such a broad focus, King had to structure his beloved community in such a way that appealed to the widest audience possible. Thus, he called upon such authoritative ideas as the American Dream, Ghandi’s principle of nonviolence, and prophetic words from the Bible. But above all, he exalted Christianity as the supreme source that would fuel the movement. Not one thing could make his dream a reality other than the love and dignity for another human, which he discovered in the Christian faith.

Although the “beloved community” was not coined for several more years, King began formulating it as he spoke to the crowd gathered at Holt Street Baptist Church. By illuminating the Christian identity and urging his audience to hold strong to it, King laid the foundation for his community, which would remain with him until his death over a decade later. In his reflections on the Montgomery Bus Boycott recorded in *Phylon*, King writes:

But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is the type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men (“Facing” 30).

It is evident that King held strong to his convictions. He was not willing to settle for any alternative source of power or motivation other than the Christian love for others as described in the Bible, and he made this known on that December night in 1955.

Performing Communal Existence

A speech cannot serve the sermonic function of rhetoric unless it aids both speaker and audience in performing communal existence. This requires that the two parties accept their corresponding roles (“leader” and “followers”) by joining together to enact the community’s shared values and beliefs. When this is done successfully, the transcendent power of community is put on full display.

At the point this address was made in his career, Dr. King was hardly renowned as a public figure. However, his inspiring cadence during the speech made it seem as though his popularity was at its peak. His words flowed poetically down from the podium and into his listeners’ ears, and they reverberated his every word, responding with all they had in

exuberant joy. This intimate relationship between speaker and audience is known as “call and response” and is defined as “the verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which each of the speaker’s statements (or “calls”) is punctuated by expressions (“responses”) from the listener” (Daniel and Smitherman 27). Embedded in the history of the African American tradition, this ritual bonds the preacher with the congregation, the speaker with the audience, and the leader with the followers. As soon as King stepped onto the stage, he entered into a sacred relationship with the crowd, who explicitly supported him in performing communal existence. They expressed their approval by chanting back such things as, “That’s right,” “Well,” “Yes,” and “Keep talking” at the end of almost every one of his statements. This prepared King to speak and his audience to receive his message.

Trained as a shepherd to lead his church flock, Martin Luther King fully comprehended the power of unity and anticipated its utility during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. That night at Holt Street Baptist Church, he made it clear that the movement did not stand a chance without a group that was not committed to all of its members. “I want to say that in all of our actions we must stick together (*That’s right*). Unity is the great need of the hour (*Well, that’s right*), and if we are united we can get many of the things that we not only desire but which we justly deserve (*Yeah*).” Again, just before concluding his speech, King persuades his gatherers that they must be one body acting in unison: “... As we prepare ourselves for what lies ahead, let us go out with a grim and bold determination that we are going to stick together [*applause*]. We are going to work together [*applause*].”

King knew that this community, and any others that desired change, would never amount to anything unless its beliefs translated into action. The responsibility of the rhetor that propagates sermonic discourse is to stir the audience to collective action, whether it be

through protest, retaliation, or outright war. King knew that if he stimulated the crowd enough, he would also be responsible for how they responded. So, motivated by Christian love, he wisely etched out the path he wanted his audience to walk down, and then gently guided them toward it. Just after he pleads for the community to maintain their Christian identity, he tells them, “It is not enough for us to talk about love, love is one of the pivotal points of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation (*All right*). Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love (*Well*).”

Elsewhere, King sternly warns the crowd that he is by no means advocating violence. Thus throughout his address, King delicately steers his audience away from both a violent resistance defined by hate and a passive resistance defined by apathy. Instead, he settles for a passionate movement of protest, which acts in love but will not relent until a fully integrated society is obtained.

CONCLUSION

Hours before the mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church, committee members of the Montgomery Improvement Association meticulously selected candidates to head the organization. Every member who gathered that afternoon recognized the potential implications of a successful boycott for the city of Montgomery, the South, and the nation at large. With this in mind, the committee unanimously settled on the president and keynote speaker of that night’s meeting: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The twenty-six year old King stood before five thousand gatherers as an untested, unknown, and relatively inexperienced spokesman; he descended the stage an inspiring leader, a prophetic speaker, and the new face of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Address at Holt Street Baptist Church constitutes every aspect of the genre of sermonic discourse, as outlined by Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Lucaites. After successfully identifying himself with his audience, King proceeded to define the fundamental values of his community by appealing to the yearning for American citizenship, the memories of past hardships, and the adherence to Christian virtues. By constructing the beloved community, King responded to his audience's greatest needs and ranked their values in the appropriate and most effective order. Finally, King walked beside his flock, softly nudging them from passive observation to dynamic participation in what would become one of the most significant movements in American history.

This essay dissected King's first public address in order to identify the influences of his political rhetoric and trace the origins of the public figure that we honor today. The poise, eloquence, and maturity in which he delivered the speech all reflect his eligibility to lead. The euphoria and jubilation in which his African American brothers and sisters received his message reflect their admiration for him as an elected leader. Although he would gain much more notoriety in future speaking engagements, King left Holt Street that night a changed man, undeniably ordained to both preach his faith and speak for justice.

The Holt Street Address is overlooked and underappreciated as a rhetorical piece, and yet its words reveal the origins of one of America's most cherished figures. Hidden between each line is the genesis of King's political rhetoric and the mystery of how a middle-class preacher's son aroused his people to abandon their nation's bleak past and press on toward freedom and equality. King closed his speech prophetically imagining how future generations would interpret the Montgomery Bus Boycott: "Right here in Montgomery, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, 'There lived a race of people, a

black people, fleecy locks and black complexion, a people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization.’ And we’re gonna do that. God grant that we will do it.” More than fifty years ago, King began the movement by offering up his unfading hope and audacious desire. Today, we have witnessed its fulfillment: it is recorded in the history books, amended in our Constitution, and embedded into the fabric of our nation.

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