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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Social Gospel | [Next entry](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_songs_and_the_civil_rights_movement) | |
| In an 18 July 1952 letter, Martin Luther King wrote to his future wife, Coretta Scott, about his beliefs as a minister and proclaimed: ‘‘Let us continue to hope, work, and pray that in the future we will live to see a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color. This is the gospel that I will preach to the world’’ (*Papers* 6:126). As a self-described ‘‘advocator of the social gospel,’’ King’s theology was concerned ‘‘with the whole man, not only his soul but his body, not only his spiritual well-being, but his material well-being’’ (*Papers* 6:72; *Papers* 5:422). His ministry built upon the social gospel of the Protestant church at the turn of the twentieth century and his own family’s practice of preaching on the social conditions of parishioners.  The early social gospel movement emerged during the rapidly industrializing American society following the Civil War. Recognizing the injustices of ‘‘triumphant capitalism,’’ some progressive ministers prescribed a large dose of ‘‘practical Christianity’’ to right these wrongs and directly address the social needs of the era (Hopkins, 121). One of the most prominent was Walter Rauschenbusch, a German-American who pastored a church in the Hell’s Kitchen district of New York in the late nineteenth century. In *Christianity and the Social Crisis,* Rauschenbusch traced the social gospel back to the lives of the Hebrew prophets. He stated that rather than ritualistic ceremonies, the prophets ‘‘insisted on a right life as the true worship of God’’ (Rauschenbusch, 5). This ‘‘right life’’ included the belief that ‘‘social problems are moral problems on a large scale’’ (Rauschenbusch, 6). King read *Christianity and the Social Crisis* at [**Crozer Theological Seminary**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_crozer_theological_seminary/) and wrote that its message ‘‘left an indelible imprint on my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social concern which had already grown up in me’’ (*Papers* 4:474).  Social gospel proponent [**Henry Emerson Fosdick**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_fosdick_harry_emerson_1878_1969/), popular pastor of New York’s Riverside Church during the 1930s and 1940s, was an early influence on King’s preaching. Fosdick felt that a church ‘‘that pretends to care for the souls of people but is not interested in the slums that damn them, the city government that corrupts them, the economic order that cripples them, and international relationships that, leading to peace or war, determine the spiritual destiny of innumerable souls’’ would receive divine condemnation (Fosdick, 25). He also emphasized that ‘‘the saving of society does depend on things which only high, personal religion can supply’’ (Fosdick, 38).  King’s family put him on a social gospel path, one that had already been cleared by his grandfather, [**A. D. Williams**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_williams_adam_daniel_a_d_1861_1931/), and father, [**King, Sr.**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_martin_luther_michael_sr_1897_1984/) Williams, who was minister of [**Ebenezer Baptist Church**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_ebenezer_baptist_church/) at the turn of the twentieth century, helped form the Georgia Equal Rights League in February 1906, and was a founding member of Atlanta’s branch of the [**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_national_association_for_the_advancement_of_colored_people_naacp1/). King, Sr., succeeded Williams at Ebenezer and, in a 1940 address to the Atlanta Missionary Baptist Association, he envisioned a ‘‘time when every minister will become a registered voter and a part of every movement for the betterment of our people’’ (*Papers* 1:34). In his unpublished 1973 autobiography, King, Sr., asserted that his ministry was never ‘‘solely oriented toward life and death. It has been equally concerned with the here and now, with improving man’s lot in this life. I have therefore stressed the social gospel’’ (‘‘A Black Rebel’’). Other influences on King’s social gospel included [**Morehouse College**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_morehouse_college/) president and minister [**Benjamin Mays**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_mays_benjamin_1894_1984/), who regularly spoke against segregation in Tuesday morning chapel at the college during King’s years there. He chastised both African Americans who favored a gradualist approach to civil rights and whites who did not ‘‘want democracy to function in certain areas: especially in areas that involve Negroes’’ (Mays, ‘‘Three Great Fears’’).  King’s studies of [**Reinhold Niebuhr**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_niebuhr_reinhold_1892_1971/)’s writings at Crozer and [**Boston University**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_boston_university/) tempered his belief in the social gospel’s typical confidence in liberal theology and its reliance on human agency as a primary force for change. ‘‘While I still believed in man’s potential for good, Niebuhr made me realize his potential for evil as well,’’ King later recalled (King, Stride, 99). He also appreciated Niebuhr’s assertion that ‘‘the glaring reality of collective evil’’ was one explanation for racial hatred (King, Stride, 99).  King arrived as pastor at [**Dexter Avenue Baptist Church**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_dexter_avenue_baptist_church/) still ‘‘a firm believer in what is called the ‘social gospel’’’ (*Papers* 6:141). King tied this faith to the nonviolent protest that characterized the [**Montgomery bus boycott**](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_montgomery_bus_boycott_1955_1956/), noting that ‘‘Christ furnished the spirit and motivation’’ for the boycott (*Papers* 5:423).  King took to task those churches that separated the secular realities of daily life from spiritual needs. His vision of the church’s role in social concerns was based on the early church’s identity, in his mind, as an institution that shaped social mores and conditions. King believed that God would harshly judge the church’s apathy on these matters and, conversely, praise those clergy who would take public stands on issues confronting their parishioners’ everyday lives.  King remained a proponent of the social gospel despite the many setbacks the civil rights movement suffered in the later 1960s. In a speech delivered the day before his death, King asserted that ‘‘somehow the preacher must have a kind of fire shut up in his bones, and whenever injustice is around he must tell it’’ (King, ‘‘I’ve Been,’’ 213).  **References**  Fosdick, *Hope of the World*, 1933.  Hopkins, *Rise of the Social Gospel*, 1940.  Introduction, in *Papers* 1:**1, 10, 14, 34, 38**.  Introduction, in *Papers* 6:**2**.  King, ‘‘Accepting Responsibility for Your Actions,’’ 26 July 1953, in *Papers* 6:**139–142**.  King, ‘‘I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,’’ in *Call to Conscience*, eds. Carson and Shepard, 2001.  King, ‘‘Letter from Birmingham Jail,’’ in *Why We Can’t Wait*, 1964.  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