



## Forum

# *Power Speaking Truth to Power: The Role of the Church*

by Willie Cobb<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote, “But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.”<sup>2</sup>

Reverend King was responding to six white ministers from behind bars, after being jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, for protesting against white racism. He was responding to questions and comments such as “Why are you in Birmingham? Why is a minister involved in politics? Why are you moving so fast? You should slow down.” In one of the greatest written responses in American history, he explains the depth of racism and why white moderate ministers’ lack of response to racism disappointed him.

Reverend King is unquestionably one of the most powerful leaders in history. Borrowing the concept of power from the great theologian Paul Tillich, Rev. King often used the phrase “There is power in this movement.”<sup>3</sup> Such is this power that Rev. King alludes to as the gospel truth from the point of view of power speaking to power.<sup>4</sup>

It is time for gospel power to speak again, particularly to those who claim the gospel as their base. Throughout history, prophetic voices have spoken against injustice and called for the Church to do the same. From the very beginning, great theologians and preachers have spoken against slavery, which was, quite clearly, not Christian.

In an article published in the January-February 1996 issue of the *Catholic Answer*, Rev. Joel Panzer lays out an eloquent and beautiful argument for the Church’s teaching against slavery. From the very beginning of racial slavery in the 1400s, the Church hierarchy wrote papal bulls to explain the Church’s teaching on slavery. From 1537 to 1893, popes pleaded with the world, and with the Church, to end its practice of slavery. People did not listen. Conversely, there is evidence to indicate that there were certain popes who did not pay attention to the writings of their fellow pontiffs. Pope Innocent, for example, accepted slaves and gave them to some of his fa-

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2 Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963. Ali-Dinar, Ali B. ed. African Studies Center – University of Pennsylvania. [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html). March 30, 2017.

3 Martin Luther King, Jr., “To Paul Tillich,” Stanford University: The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/paul-tillich-0>. March 30, 2017.

4 John Green, “The Origin of the Phrase ‘Speaking Truth to Power,’” March 30, 2017, <http://classroom.synonym.com/origin-phrase-speaking-truth-to-power-11676.html>.

vorite bishops.<sup>5</sup> This was not the teaching of the magisterium. When Georgetown University sought permission from the Vatican to sell slaves (at the equivalent of \$3 million today),<sup>6</sup> ignoring the edict to end slavery, power was ignoring the Gospels as well. When power does not speak truth to power, draconian events occur.

Justice screams out from the echoes of history through the voices of such prophets as Walter Brueggemann, who states that God impinges upon God's people to do the will of God, regardless of the fact that the people are believers in the divine or not.<sup>7</sup> St. Thomas More asserted that "man cannot be separated from God, nor politics from morality."<sup>8</sup> Isaiah, Chapter 10 similarly confirms:

Woe to those who make cruel and unfair laws. And woe to you judges who issue unfair judgements. You rob poor people of their rights. And you seize the property of widows and the property of children who have no parents. You will not know what to do when fierce enemies from a distant land attack you. You will not know where to run for help. You will not know where to hide your wealth. You will not avoid punishment and death. The Lord is very angry. He lifts his hand. He is ready to strike you again.<sup>9</sup>

The time has come for power to speak gospel truth to power. The politicians of the day cannot claim gospel truth if they are reducing food subsidies, taking away healthcare, building more prisons, refusing to supply funding for clean water, etc. This belies the teachings of Pope Francis himself, who says to heal, to make whole, to listen to the words of the gospel and to feed the hungry, house the homeless, quench the thirst of the thirsty, visit the sick, and free the innocent. These are the teachings of Christ himself. Politicians cannot claim to be followers of Christ and believe in the "inductive logic" and "objectivism" of Ayn Rand at the same time.<sup>10</sup> The time has come for the Church to stand in the tradition of its prophets: from Joseph and Moses, to Isaiah and Jesus, to Martin Luther King, Jr., and now Pope Francis. Speaking gospel power to political power is the obligation of the Church.

This has always been and will always be the role of the Church: to enter the intersection of faith and politics, to keep those in political power in check and remind them of their moral obligation to protect the poor, orphans, and widows. When the Church ignores its obligation, the people suffer. When the Church allows unfettered political power, the people suffer. When the church leaders themselves misread and misunderstand the meaning of God's call from the voices of the prophets, those church leaders themselves are in danger of suffering a similar fate as that of the politicians. Any politician who believes that the government's role is not to take care of God's people is a politician who does not understand Christian tradition.

From the time of Moses and the story of salvation history to Pope Francis today, it has been the role of the Church to speak gospel power to political power, to keep politicians on the moral high ground. The Church is far from perfect on these issues, but just as it has spoken out against the slave trade from one century to the next, it is time, once again, for the Church to make a stand. The Church has an obligation to keep the politicians on a sound moral foundation, particularly those politicians who claim to be Catholic. Therefore, the Church has no

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5 Joel S. Panzer, "The Popes and Slavery," Staten Island, NJ: St. Paul's Press, Alba House, 1996. Eternal Word Television Network. <https://www.ewtn.com/library/ANSWERS/POPSLAVE.HTM>. March 30, 2017.

6 Rachel L Swarns, "272 Slaves Were Sold to Save Georgetown. What Does It Owe Their Descendants?," *New York Times*. April 16, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/us/georgetown-university-search-for-slave-descendants.html>.

7 Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009.

8 John Paul II, Apostolic Letter: St. Thomas More Patron of Statesmen. Crossroads Initiative. Jun 22, 2016. <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/st-thomas-more-patron-of-statesmen-pope-john-paul-ii>. (The introduction to the letter reads: John Paul II's proclamation of Saint Thomas More as Patron of Statesmen and Politicians, an example of moral integrity, a witness to the primacy of the truth over power and a defender of the inalienable dignity of the human conscience)

9 Is 10:1-34 (Catholic Public Domain Version).

10 To learn more about the philosophy, writings, and practices of Ayn Rand and her influence on popular and political thought, visit [https://www.revoly.com/topic/Objectivism%20\(Ayn%20Rand\)&item\\_type=topic](https://www.revoly.com/topic/Objectivism%20(Ayn%20Rand)&item_type=topic).

choice but to be involved in politics. The time is long past for the Church to once again speak power to power. From gospel power to political power, such is the role of the Church.