

# A biography of Martin Luther King Jr.

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helped establish Atlanta's NAACP chapter. After King's father married the Williamses' only child, Alberta, and then succeeded as Ebenezer's pastor when his father-in-law died in 1931, the elder King continued the family tradition of forceful preaching and civil rights activism, leading campaigns for black voting rights and equal salaries for black teachers.

In an autobiographical statement written while a student at Crozer, King Jr. described the "noble example" of his father as "the great moving factor" in his decision to become a minister, but he also wavered between acceptance of and rebellion against the religious traditions his father represented. His persistent doubts about Baptist tenets were not allayed until his undergraduate years at Morehouse College (1944-1948), when he came under the influence of President Benjamin Mays and Professor George Kelsey, men he saw as "deeply religious" yet "learned" — "the ideal I wanted a minister to be." During subsequent theological studies at Crozer (1948-1951) and Boston University, King gradually reconciled teenage skepticism with his "inner urge... to serve humanity" through the ministry. His academic papers, flawed by plagiarisms, displayed his determined effort to appropriate modern theological and philosophical ideas that would be useful to him in his role as an activist preacher.

In one of his papers he explained that his goal was to "synthesize the best in liberal theology with the best in neo-orthodox theology," and many of his later writings and speeches would display this characteristic eclecticism and dialectical approach. King's 1953 marriage to Coretta Scott, who shared many of his dissenting views on politics and religion, strengthened his ability to embrace his inherited calling while also transcending it. He drew freely on the works of liberals Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman, and was strongly influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr's political and ethical realism and the older Social Gospel theology of Walter Rauschenbusch.

#### A spokesman for civil rights

Once Rosa Park's defiance of southern segregation thrust him into a leadership role in the

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