

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

No. 606

Let Freedom Ring: Making the Dream a Reality

*by J. Kenneth Blackwell
with Introduction by William J. Bennett*



Founded in 1973, The Heritage Foundation is a research and educational institute—a think tank—whose mission is to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense.

Heritage's staff pursues this mission by performing timely and accurate research addressing key policy issues and effectively marketing these findings to its primary audiences: members of Congress, key congressional staff members, policy makers in the executive branch, the nation's news media, and the academic and policy communities. Heritage's products include publications, articles, lectures, conferences, and meetings.

Governed by an independent Board of Trustees, The Heritage Foundation is a non-partisan, tax exempt institution. Heritage relies on the private financial support of the general public—individuals, foundations, and corporations—for its income, and accepts no government funds and performs no contract work. Heritage is one of the nation's largest public policy research organizations. More than 200,000 contributors make it the most broadly supported in America.

Note: Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Note: Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
202/546-4400
<http://www.heritage.org>

Let Freedom Ring: Making the Dream a Reality

J. Kenneth Blackwell

WILLIAM J. BENNETT: Recently, I testified before the Presidential Commission on Race. When we started talking about things like families, schools, and subject matter, we weren't talking about race anymore. But I must say, on a day dedicated to education, it was remarkable how little was said about educational subjects such as math, English, history, or science and how much was said about other things, such as conflict resolution seminars and diversity training.

One somewhat got the feeling that this was an unwitting effort put up in the name of a full discussion of race but against the education of the children of the poor. Suggestions that would never be accepted in an upper-class white community were advanced as serious recommendations for the children of the poor. If in the white community you were emphasizing the basics—discipline, hard work, aspiration, homework, and drill—for the children of the poor you should emphasize diversity training, conflict resolution, and multiculturalism.

The late Al Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, told a great story about going into an inner-city classroom. He asked the kids who were "C" and "D" students, "What do you want to study?" There was a pause, and a child raised his hand and said, "We want to know what the smart kids know." That's exactly right. Every child in America is entitled to the best that we have to offer.

That was a belief of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. I make it a point to describe him as the Reverend Martin Luther King. On a wonderful occasion when I was secretary of education, Ken Blackwell and Mrs. King invited me to Atlanta to speak. I brought along a bunch of photocopies from history books pointing out that Dr. King was mostly described—and this is still the case—as a social activist and not as a man of faith. But most important to him was his calling as a preacher, as a man of God. In the literal meaning of the term, it was his inspiration. This country owes a great debt to Martin Luther King, Jr., and we're trying to repay it in some small part today here at The Heritage Foundation by inviting a true dream-maker to address us.

I've known Ken Blackwell for a number of years. The last time we were together for a sustained period of time was, I think, in 1990, when I came out to Ohio to campaign for Ken for Congress.

J. Kenneth Blackwell is the Treasurer of Ohio. William J. Bennett is a Distinguished Fellow at The Heritage Foundation.

He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on January 14, 1998.

ISSN 0272-1155 © 1998 by The Heritage Foundation

Ken is a man I admire enormously. You can call him secretary, because he's been an undersecretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. You can call him ambassador, because he represented the United States at the United Nations Human Rights Commission. You can call him mayor, because he was elected mayor of Cincinnati. You can call him treasurer, because he serves the citizens of Ohio as the state's treasurer. He was a member of the National Commission on Economic Growth and Tax Reform—the Kemp Commission.

He is a true civic man: interested not only in fiscal affairs, but in education issues, welfare issues, crime issues. He is involved in every aspect of his community. He is one of the great citizens of his state. He has much to teach the citizens of Ohio, I believe, and much to teach all of us. So without further ado, let me introduce a true leader: my friend and our colleague, Ken Blackwell.

J. KENNETH BLACKWELL: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., taught that each and every one of us is faced with a crucial question as we reflect on the meaning and purpose of our lives. We must make a choice, he said. Will we be a person or a people that is made by history? Or will we be a person or a people that makes history?

Dr. King had a clear understanding and a fundamental belief that we, made in God's image, have the moral agency to understand the difference between the way the world is and the way the world ought to be. Throughout human history there is a gap between the promise and the practice of world peace, of the American dream or of the vision that Dr. King had for America. Each one of us standing in the gap has an opportunity—and more important, the capacity—to be an agent for change, an agent for betterment, an agent for justice and equality.

Dr. King understood that in some things we are not equal. We have differences in intelligence, in our emotional composition and makeup. We have different hair texture and different eye color. But these are incidentals. Dr. King understood that we are equal in something essential: our accountability to God. We are all made in God's image, and we have all been invested by God with unalienable dignity. If God won't give up on us, who are we to give up on each other?

Dr. King understood that the miracle of life wasn't just in life's beginning, but also in life's capacity to be renewed. He never gave up on a person or people. He knew that we had the capacity to change not only our conditions, but ourselves.

That became the basis of Dr. King's quest for equality and justice and economic empowerment for all Americans. He understood that we live in a society where some people might be on the top rung of the ladder, others on the middle rungs, and some on the bottom rungs. Life, after all, is competitive. We are different in talents and motivation. But Dr. King understood that within the context of God's equal investment in us, we could not tolerate a society where some people are pushed off the ladder or prevented from taking the first step up.

Now go back to his question. Each one of us has an opportunity to answer, "Am I a person who will be made by history, or will I be a person that changes history?" It is only when we have a fundamental faith in our capacity to change the human condition that we have hope.

Dr. King went to God's Word. God sent us His Son. If you're a Christian, you take this as a matter of faith. But if you're not a Christian, you still can take it for the powerful story that it is. At the moment in Christian belief that God's Son died for us, we went from a world of a hopeless end to a world of endless hope. Dr. King wanted us, through his dream and through his vision, to tap into that endless dream of hope. When coupled with our capacity to change conditions, Dr. King knew that we could close the gap between the promise of America and its performance at any point in history. He knew the human condition was not a spectator sport. If you want more effective schools or more responsive churches or safer neighborhoods, then you can't sit on the sideline and be a cheerleader. You have to be in the parade. You have to be in the movement.

Dr. King gave us more than a dream; he gave us a wake-up call. He wanted us to have the dream, catch the vision—but then wake up and act on it.

A friend of mine, the motivational speaker Les Gaines, loves to tell this story. A man came into work and his boss noticed his ear was all singed and crinkled and pressed up against the side of his head. The boss asked, "What happened to your ear?" As the guy started to answer, his boss saw the other ear was just as crinkled, just as singed, and just as pressed up against the other side of his head. The guy said, "You know, my wife, every morning she gets up and she irons on the side of the bed. She ironed her skirt, put the iron on the night stand, and the telephone rang. Instead of picking up the phone, I picked up the iron and put it up against my head." His boss said, "Okay, horrible story. I can understand why one ear is like that, but why is the other ear like that?" The man answered, "The fool called back."

The message of the story is that we have to wake up—fully wake up. Just catching the vision, catching the dream, is not enough. We have to wake up, and we have to act on it.

When I was 14, I thought I was God's gift to amateur boxing. I won my first four bouts with relative ease. In my fifth bout, I got hit so hard in my nose that I had to go home and tell my father I was going to find a more scholarly career to pursue. I stayed away from the boxing arena until I was a freshman at Xavier University.

There, Father E. J. O'Connor, a 72-year-old Jesuit, was a boxing fanatic. He asked me and a friend of mine, Benji Schwartz, to go off to the Golden Gloves bouts with him. We watched ten bouts. In the 11th bout, an average Catholic boy from the West side of Cincinnati came out. Before his fight, he made the sign of the cross. Benji, who was Jewish, leaned over to Father and said, "Father, what's the significance of that?" Father said, "Tiger, not enough if he can't fight."

Father O'Connor understood the power of symbols in Christian life. But he knew that just going through the motions with the symbols wasn't enough. You must wake up from the dream, understand the essence of the vision, and then do the work necessary to convert the dream to reality. We have the capacity to do this.

I lived the first eight years of my life in public housing. My father had come back from World War II to an America that was struggling between its promise and its practice. There was a housing shortage. There were still vestiges of discrimination and segregation in housing. So we lived in a public-housing community.

My father would never let us say we were poor. He said, "You can say you are 'temporarily of low income.'" He said that's a statement of the temporary state of your pocketbook. But to say you are poor could be a reflection of your permanent state of mind.

He had a strong work ethic. He would quote Vince Lombardi, the great football coach, and Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist. He would always say, "In this country you might not always get what you pay for"—right out of Frederick Douglass's speeches—"but you always pay for what you get."

Freedom is not free. You must work hard for freedom. He told us, "Doing the Lord's work doesn't pay much, but the retirement plan is out of this world."

We were blessed. We didn't have a television. My mother would make me and my brother read to her every night from the Bible or from a volume of the works of Lewis Carroll. It was a volume that my grandmother, a former domestic worker, had gotten from one of the families for which she worked.

By age nine, I was Southwestern Ohio's leading authority on the literary works of Lewis Carroll. There was a passage in *Alice in Wonderland* where the Mad Hatter had made a mess in front of himself. Instead of cleaning up that mess, he would move down the table to a clean spot and make another mess. Too many of us live our lives like that. We just jump in, make a mess, and then keep moving. We don't focus on cleaning up, on problem-solving, on struggling with the challenges of cleaning up the human condition.

One of my favorite passages in the Bible captures the essence of Martin Luther King and what he tried to do to and for America. Nehemiah, in 435 BC, got a wake-up call. God asked Nehemiah to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem, which had crumbled. He went out, took a look at that job, and was smart enough to understand he couldn't do it by himself. Nehemiah went back into the old city, and he let out a clarion call: "Come, let us build together." He didn't say, "Come, let us tear it down." He didn't say, "One by one let us build." He said, "Come, let us build up together now."

Let me interject something. My grandmother was the first unlicensed psychologist I ever met. She used to tell my brother and me, "We're sending you out into the world. You're going to meet four types of people—holdouts, sold-outs, dropouts, and all-outs."

She said the holdouts are the self-doubters. They always have low expectations. The sold-outs would rather exploit humanity than enhance it. The dropouts don't understand that the human condition, the human struggle, is sometimes painful. They don't understand that you have to go through the thunder and the lightning and the clouds and the overcast days to reach the sunshine. So the dropouts find a route to escape, whether it's alcoholism, drug addiction, or watching soap operas all day. The all-outs, she said, are just ordinary folk who give you 100 percent. They are not sprinters but long-distance runners.

Now go back to Nehemiah. He in fact had to work through holdouts, sold-outs, and dropouts. "Oh, come down off that wall, you can't do that." He had hope, though. He answered, "Let's build together." Nehemiah was the first practitioner of the politics of inclusion. He didn't separate the folks inside the house along race lines, gender lines, or income lines. He said, "Come, let us build together." All of us build up. Work right past those holdouts, dropouts, and sold-outs. Build a community of doers.

That's what Dr. King was about. He also sent forth a clarion call. His was: "Let us build up America. Let us stand in the gap between the promise of equality and the practice of inequality and close it. Let us close the gap between recognition of human dignity and non-recognition of our equality. Let us close the gap between the image of man as a failure and the image of man as the object of redemptive love." Nehemiah's people got the job done. They woke up, stayed focused, and, unlike the Mad Hatter, finished the job before they moved on. They never lost sight of the mission, or who gave them the mission—God.

Reflect on it. It wasn't M. L. King. It wasn't Martin Luther King. It wasn't Dr. King. It was the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Understand the man in his totality. He understood God's Word that we, acting on the talents that God has given us individually and collectively, can do anything. We can close the gap. We can build our cities. We can convert our cities from killing fields to fields of dreams. But we can't do it as cheerleaders. We have to do it as all-outs—as participants.

I close my remarks focusing on the children among us. I was the first in a long time in my family to go to college. My grandmother said, "You're going to a big university full of great books. There are three books that you better familiarize yourself with."

The first book is your datebook or your calendar. It tells how you spend your time and with whom you spend it. Run away from those holdouts, sold-outs, and dropouts. Look for those all-outs. Spend your time with them. Next is your checkbook. That tells you how you spend your resources. No matter how much or how little money you have, what you do with that money says something about how smart you are. It's how you use it and (you adults) how you give it back. Then my grandmother gave me a Bible, which I still have. This is the third book, and the most important book. It is your moral compass. It is your guidebook, the map that helps you choose the path of conviction over the path of convenience.

That is what Dr. King was saying to us. We must leverage our resources, spend our time wisely, and rejoice in the message of God if we are to change America, and if we are to change the world.

It was a wake-up call, ladies and gentlemen. It was not just a dream. It was a call to action, morally guided action. I would challenge you as you leave today, as you think about the life of Dr. King, that you remember Luke 12:48: "To those to whom much is given, much is required." We have been blessed with opportunity, blessed with the sacrifice of a lot of folks. We see a horizon of a better tomorrow because of those whose shoulders we stand on. Go forward with this. In our lives, in our present day of America, there are times when we have to wake up, stay up, pray up, and, yes, pay up. But let's commit ourselves to never backing up, giving up, or shutting up until we have made a better world for all of us.