to win their associates to communism. How many Christian students in our universities today have ever tried to win other students to Christ? How many of you on your jobs have ever attempted to win others to Christ? Would today that the Christian fire were burning with the same intensity in the hearts of Christians as the Communist fire is burning in the hearts of Communists? We must match the evangelistic passion of the Communists. We must unreservedly commit ourselves to the cause of Christ.

It seems that I can hear a voice crying through the vista of time: “ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in Judea and in Samara, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” I can hear the same voice saying, “go out into the highways and hedges and compel men to come.” I can hear the same voice saying, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” Who this afternoon will answer saying “Here am I O Lord, and I unreservedly commit myself to thy cause.”

Preached Aug 9, 1953

TAD  CSKC  Sermon file, folder 10, “Communism’s Challenge to Christianity”

12 Acts 1:8
13 Luke 14:23
14 Mark 16:15

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

“The Dimensions of a Complete Life,”
Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[24 January 1954]
[Montgomery, Ala.]

King delivered a version of this sermon at Dexter in Montgomery, Alabama, as the congregation considered him as a candidate to be their new pastor. In a letter sent prior to King’s appearance, Dexter deacon and choir director Joseph T. Brooks advised.

1  King’s sermon title for the Dexter service was “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life” (Mary K. Frazier, “News of Colored People,” Montgomery Examiner, 28 January 1954). He filed this document with another handwritten draft of this sermon that contained a discussion of only two of the three dimensions referred to in the sermon (“The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life,” 24 January 1954). King wrote on the folder “Preached at Dexter January 1954.” This was the first sermon that Coretta Scott heard King deliver, indicating it was developed by the early part of 1952 (Coretta Scott King, My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr [New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969], p. 59). He preached a version of the sermon on 6 September 1953 at Ebenezer Baptist Church and in 1960 during a fund-raising tour of California for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) (“King Jr to End Series of Summer Sermons, Ebenezer,” Atlanta Daily World, 5 September 1953, King, The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life,” Sermon Delivered at Friendship Baptist Church, 28 February 1960, pp 395-405 in this volume). For other versions of this sermon, see King, The Measure of a Man.
"The Dimension of a Complete Life"

"The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal." Rev. xxi. 16

One day out on a lonely, obscure island

called Patmos, a man by the name of John caught

vision of "the holy Jerusalem" descending out of heaven from

God. To him it was the picture of humanity

as it should be in its completeness. It was the

picture of the new Jerusalem, new in structure,

new in outlook, new in character. One of the

greatest glories of the new humanity city which

she saw was its completeness. It was not

partial and one-sided, but in all other dimens

it was complete. And so we read in our

text: "The length and the breadth and the

height of it are equal." The new city

of God, the city of ideal humanity is not

one on one side and down on the other; it is

not to an unbalanced entity; it is complete.
that he “plan a sermon which will not require too much dependence on a manu-
script” 2 According to a local newspaper account King was heard by “a large and
appreciative audience” 3

In this handwritten draft, King draws on the theme, structure, and some of the
language of Phillips Brooks’s “The Symmetry of Life” 4 King urges his listeners to
fulfill their God-given purposes in life, to develop concern for the welfare of others,
and to seek God. Regarding the need to be concerned about others he concludes,
“No man should become so involved in his personal ambitions that he forgets that
other people exist in the world. Indeed if my life’s work is not developed for the good
of humanity, it is meaningless” and Godless 5

Text “The Length and the Breadth and the Height of it are equal” Rev xxvi 16 6

One day out on a lonely obscure island called Patmos a man by the name of John
catched vision of “the holy Jerusalem” descending out of heaven from God 6 To him
it was the picture of humanity as it should be in its completeness. It was the picture
of the new Jerusalem, new in structure, new in outlook, new in character. One of the
greatest glories of the new heavenly city which he saw was its completeness. It was
not partial and one-sided, but in all three dimension it was complete 7 And so we
read in our text “The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal.” The
new city of God, the city of ideal humanity is not up on one side and down on the
other, it is not an unbalanced entity, it is complete on all sides.

John is saying something in this text which has eternal significance 8 Behind his

Dimensions of a Complete Life,” Sermon Delivered at the Unitarian Church of Germantown, 11
December 1960 in Papers 5, 571–579.

2 Brooks also wrote King “We are glad that you can come to us for the fourth Sunday” (J. T. Brooks


Dutton, 1949), pp. 195–206. In a later interview King acknowledged that Brooks’s sermon was the inspira-
tion for this sermon (Marcyn Warren, “A Rhetorical Study of the Preaching of Doctor Martin Luther
King, Jr., Pastor and Pulpit Orator” [Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1966], p. 105).

5 Revelation 21:16 “And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth and he
measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height
of it are equal”


7 Brooks, Selected Sermons, p. 195. “St. John in his great vision sees the mystic city, ‘the holy Jeru-
salem,’ descending out of heaven from God. It is the picture of glorified humanity, of humanity as it shall
be when it is brought to its completeness by being thoroughly filled with God. And one of the glories of the
city which he saw was its symmetry. Our cities, our developments and presentations of human life, are
partial and one-sided. This city out of heaven was symmetrical. In all its three dimensions it was complete.
Neither was sacrificed to the other.”

8 In the sermon’s other draft, King added, “For most of us the book of revelation is a very difficult
book, puzzling to decode. We see it as a great enigma wrapped in mystery. Now it is true that if we look
upon the book of Revelation as the record of actual historical occurrences, it is a very difficult book,
shrouded with impenetrable mysteries. But if we will look beneath the peculiar jargon of the author and
the prevailing apocalyptic’s symbolism we will be able to find there many eternal truths which forever chal-
poetic imagination and apocalyptic symbolism there is an eternal truth which we must forever recognize, and that is that life at its best and life as it should be is the life that is complete on all sides. So much of the noblest life which we have seen, both collective and individual, dissatisfies us with its partialness, so many of the greatest men we see are great only upon certain sides and have their other sides so flat and small, so many of our greatest civilization are great only on certain sides and have their other sides so low and degrading.

And yet life as it should be is the life that is rich and strong all round, complete on every side.9 There are then three dimensions of the complete life to which we can fitly give the three names of our text, Length, Breath and Height. The Length of life, as we shall use it, is, of course, not its duration. It is rather the push of a life forward to its own personal ends and ambitions. It is the inward concern for achieving our own personal end and ambitions. The Breath of life is the outward concern for the welfare of others. The Height of life is the upward reach toward God. These are the three dimensions of life, and without the due development of all no life becomes complete.10 Give [illustration?] of a triangle 11

Think first about the Length of life, [word illegible] that dimension of life in which every man seeks to [strikeout illegible] developm his inward powers.12 Every man has the responsibility to discover his mission in life. God has created every normal person with a capacity to achieve some end. Some are probably endowed with more talent than others, but not none of us of left talentless.

9 Brooks, Selected Sermons, p. 195. “So much of the noblest life which the world has seen dissatisfies us with its partialness, so many of the greatest men we see are great only upon certain sides, and have their other sides all shrunken, flat, and small, that it may be well for us to dwell upon the picture, which these words suggest, of a humanity rich and full and strong all round, complete on every side, the perfect cube of human life which comes down out of heaven from God.”

10 Brooks, Selected Sermons, p. 196. “There are, then, three dimensions or dimensions of human life to which we may fitly give these three names, Length and Breath and Height. The Length of a life, in this meaning of it, is, of course, not its duration. It is rather the reaching on and out of a man, in the line of activity and thought and self-development, which is indicated and prophesied by the character which is natural within him, by the special ambitions which spring up out of his special powers. It is the push of a life forward to its own personal ends and ambitions. The Breath of a life, on the other hand, is its outreach laterally, if we may say so. It is the constantly diffusive tendency which is always drawing a man outward into sympathy with other men. And the Height of a life is its reach upward towards God, its sense of childhood, its consciousness of the Divine Life over it with which it tries to live in love, communion, and obedience. These are the three dimensions of a life,—its length and breadth and height,—without the due development of all of which no life becomes complete.”

11 In the sermon’s other draft, King wrote out the illustration “At one angle stands the individual person, at the other angle stands other persons, and at the top stands God. Unless these three are concatenated, working harmoniously together in a single life, that life is incomplete” (“The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life,” 24 January 1954).

12 In the sermon’s other draft, King added “This is really the selfish dimension of life. There is such a thing as rational and moral self-interest. As the late Joshua Liebman said in an interesting chapter in his book entitled Peace of Mind, we must first love ourselves properly before we can adequately love others. Many people have been plunged across the abyss of emotional fatalism because they didn’t love themselves” (King, “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life,” 24 January 1954). Joshua Loth Liebman (1907–1948) was a Reformed Jewish rabbi who served temples in Chicago and Boston. King most likely refers to the book’s third chapter, “Love Thyself Properly” in Peace of Mind (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), pp. 38–58.
(1) Use what you have. Don't worry about others. Discover what you have and what you can do.
(2) After you have discovered what you are made for, seek to do it with all the power there is in your system. Do it as if God ordained you to do it. Let nothing cause you to lose sight of your ultimate aim. Use the ill of Jesus. (For this cause came I into the world.)
(3) Never consider your life's work insignificant. Quote Malloch.
(4) Set yourself earnestly to see what you were made to do, and then set yourself earnestly to do it.

This clear onward push the end is the length of a man's life.

Now there are some men who never get beyond this first dimension of living. I'm sure you've seen such people. These people are only concerned about themselves.

Now although this is an important dimension of life, it is not the only dimension. If a life is to be complete we must not stop with this dimension. There are some people who never get beyond this first dimension of life. I'm sure you have seen such people. These people are only concerned about themselves. They seek to achieve their ambitions at any cost. So if life is to be complete it must move beyond length to what we have called breadth. I have ventured to call this quality of breadth in a man's life its outreach for the welfare of others. No man has learned to live until he can rise out of his mere concern for self to the broader concern for others. Indeed the prayer that every man should learn to pray is, "Lord teach me to unselfishly serve humanity." No man should become so involved in his personal ambitions that he forgets that other people exist in the world. Indeed if my life's work is not developed for the good of humankind, it is meaningless and Godless. Length without Breadth is dead and narrow. I say to you whatever you do in life do it for the good

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13 In the sermon's other draft, King wrote, "He should seek to do it so well that the living, the dead, and the unborn could do it no better." ("The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," 24 January 1954)
14 Of John 18:37
15 In the sermon's other draft, King wrote, "If it is for the uplifting of humanity, it has cosmic significance, however small it is. If you are called to a little job, seek to do it in a big way. If your life's work is confined to the ordinary, seek to do it in an extraordinary way. If you discover that you are called to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michael Angelo painted pictures, like Beethoven composed music, and like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, 'here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.'" (King, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," 24 January 1954) King once attributed this illustration to Benjamin Mays (King, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," Address Delivered at NAACP Emancipation Day Rally, 1 January 1957, in The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr, vol 4 Symbol of the Movement, January 1957-December 1958, eds Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Adrienne Clay, Virginia Shadron, Keran Taylor [Berkeley and Los Angeles University of California Press, 2000], p 79)
17 In the sermon's other draft, King wrote, "They brilliantly develop their inner powers, but they live as if nobody else lives in the world but themselves. Other persons become mere steps by which they climb to their personal ambitions. There is nothing more tragic than to see a person bogged down in the length of life devoid of breadth." ("The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," 24 January 1954)
of humanity. Don't do it merely for the prestige that it brings or the money that it brings, but do it for the serving of humanity.

(Bring in the relevance of this truth on the international scene. How nations have tried to live to themselves.) Along with this comes the realization that we are not independent. The thinking man realizes that real life is interdependent. (Show the ill of how before breakfast is over we are dependent on the whole world.) All life is involved in a single process so that whatever effects one directly affects all indirectly. Quote John Donne: "No man is an island."

Now one more dimension of the complete life still remains, viz the Height. The Height of life is its reach upward toward something distinctly greater than humanity. Man must rise above earth to that great eternal reality who is the source and end of life. And so when we add Height to length and breath we have the complete life.

There are many men who who are wholly creative of the earth. There are those who never look up, who never seem to have anything to do with anything above this flat and level plain of human life. The tragedy of much of modern life is that in quest of our [personal?] and social goals we have unconsciously forgotten God. We have pursued the length and breadth of life and neglected the Height. And so we find ourselves living a disorganized, incomplete and disconnected life. (Quote H. G. Wells)

In our age of science and materialism so many things have come which seem to make God [irrelevant?]. Illustrate.

In our age we have set forth so many substitutes for God (Inventions, money). But my friends, televisions and automobiles, subways and automobiles, dollars and cents can never be substitutes for God. For long before these came into existence...

18 At this point, King began using a second pen. In the sermon's other draft, King paraphrased the parable of the Good Samaritan in this section ("The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," 24 January 1954, see also King: "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," 28 February 1960, p. 399 in this volume).

19 In a later version of this sermon, King discussed the international implications of the breadth of life with regard to world poverty and health care ("The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," 28 February 1960, pp. 400-401 in this volume).

20 For an example of this illustration taken from minister Leslie Weatherhead, see King, The Man Who Was a Fool, Sermon Delivered at the Detroit Council of Churches' Noon Lenten Services, 6 March 1961, pp. 415-416 in this volume.

21 King refers to John Donne's poem "Meditation XVII," *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624). King wrote Donne's poem on the folder containing this sermon.


23 Brooks, *Selected Sermons*, p. 202. "Evidently all that I have yet described, all the length and breadth of life, might exist, and yet man be a creature wholly of the earth. He might even enter into living sympathy with his brother men, and yet never look up, never seem to have anything to do with anything above this flat and level plain of human life."

24 King may refer to the following H. G. Wells quote: "Religion is the first thing and the last thing, and until a man has found God and been found by God, he begins at no beginning, he works toward no end." (Wells, *Mr Branning See It Through* [New York: Macmillan, 1916], p. 442). For an example of King's use of this quote, see "Creating an Abundant Life," Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 26 September 1954, p. 191 in this volume.)
tence we needed God and long after they shall have passed away we will still need God. Look up beyond your self interest. Look up beyond your concern for humanity. Look up to the very height of life itself and then you find God who makes life complete. We are commanded to love ourselves and we are commanded to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, but still there is a greater commandments which say “Love the Lord thy God.”

God is the end of life. We were made for God and we will be restless until we find rest in him.

AD CSKC Sermon file, folder 21, “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life”

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26 King probably refers to Augustine Confessions 11: “Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise, for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.”