"Going Forward by Going Backward,"
Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

4 April 1954
Montgomery, Ala

Dexter's congregation voted unanimously to call King as their new pastor in early March 1954. Several weeks after the vote, King returned to meet with the church's pulpit committee regarding the details of their offer. At that time, he preached the following sermon, which has the same text, themes, and structure as Rediscovering Lost Values, a sermon he had delivered at Detroit's Second Baptist Church four weeks earlier. In this typed manuscript, King reasons with his audience, "If we are to go forward we must go back and find God." Furthermore, he asserts, "Our problem lies in the fact that through our scientific genius we have made of the world a neighborhood but through our moral genius we have failed to make of it a brotherhood.

There is something wrong with our world, something fundamentally and basically wrong. When we stop to analyze the cause of our world's ill, many things come to mind. We wonder if it is due to the fact that we don't know enough. But certainly it can't be that, for in terms of accumulated knowledge we know more today than men have known in any period of human history. We wonder if it is due to a failure to keep our scientific progress abreast with our progress in other areas. But certainly it can't be this, for our progress scientifically has been amazing. Man through his scientific genius has been able to draft distance and place time in chains. Moreover, through his scientific genius, man has stamped out many of his dread plagues and diseases, alleviated his pain, prolonged his life and given himself greater security and physical well-being. And so our problem cannot be in the scientifc realm.

It seems to me that if we are to find the cause of our world's ill we must turn to the hearts and souls of men. Our problem lies in the fact that our material and intellectual advances have outrun our moral progress. Everywhere when we compare ourselves with previous generations with reference to our means for living, we are supreme. Yes, the scientific and educational means by which we live can hardly be surpassed, but the moral and spiritual ends for which we live stand almost in a state of oblivion. How much of our modern life is summarized in that shrewd phrase of

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1. Dexter church clerk Robert D. Nesbitt and deacon chairman Thomas H. Randall sent King a telegram informing him of the church's vote. They expressed an interest in meeting with him on 20 March but King had other commitments and suggested rescheduling the meeting for the first Sunday in April (Nesbitt and Randall to King, 7 March 1954, and King to Pulpit Committee, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 10 March 1954, in Papers 2 256 and 258–259, respectively)
2. King, Rediscovering Lost Values, 28 February 1954, in Papers 2 248–256. King preached a version of "Going Forward by Going Backward" as early as 26 October 1952 in Portsmouth, New Hampshire (People's Baptist Church, Program, "Fifty-ninth anniversary service") and, according to a date written on this document, also delivered this sermon on 16 August 1953, during his time as Ebenezer's associate pastor. King also gave a version of this sermon before the Chicago Sunday Evening Club on 21 February 1960, which was later published (King, "Going Forward by Going Backward," The A M E Church Review [April–June 1960] 62–67)
Thoreau, "Improved means to an unimproved end". Our problem lies in the fact that through our scientific genius we have made of the world a neighborhood, but through our moral genius we have failed to make of it a brotherhood. And the great danger confronting us today is not the atomic bomb created by physical science, not the atomic bomb that we can put in an airplane and drop on hundreds and thousands of people, but the atomic bomb which we have to fear today is that atomic bomb which lies in the hearts and souls of men, capable of exploding into the vilest of hate and into the most damaging selfishness.

My friends, if our civilization is to go forward today, we must go back and pick up those precious moral values that we have left behind. And unless we go backward to rediscover these moral and spiritual values, we will certainly not move forward to the city of peace and happiness. Our situation in the world today reminds one of a situation that took place in the life of Jesus. As you remember Jesus's parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the passover. When Jesus was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast. After they had fulfilled their days they set out to return to Nazareth. Jesus being a very serious-minded and inquisitive child remained behind in Jerusalem, asking and hearing questions, and his parents knew not of it. The story goes that the parents of Jesus travelled a whole day's journey before they missed him. And then Luke says: "When they found him not, they turned back to Jerusalem seeking him." In other words the parents of Jesus realized that they had left a mighty precious value behind, and before they could go forward to Nazareth, they had to go backward to Jerusalem to rediscover this something of value they had lost.

There are many precious values that our civilization needs to rediscover. Unless we go back and pick them up we cannot go forward to the city of peace. First, we need to go back and pick up the principle that all reality hinges on moral foundations. We must rediscover the value that there are moral laws of the universe just as abiding as the physical laws. We have lost these values today. At least two things convince me that modern man has strayed away from the principle that there is a moral order of the universe. The first is that most people today have adopted a sort of relativistic ethic. By this I mean that most people feel that right and wrong are relative to their taste and their customs and their particular communities. So that there is really nothing absolutely right and absolutely wrong. It just depends on what the majority of the people are doing. This philosophy has invaded the whole of modern life. Now I admit that there are certain customs and folkways which aren't right or wrong. They are simply amoral, they have no moral value. But on the other hand there are certain things that are absolutely right and absolutely wrong. The eternal...
King speaks with a parishioner on the steps of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 1956. Photo by Dan Weiner; courtesy of Sandra Weiner and the Collection of the International Center of Photography.

God of the universe has ordained it to be so. It's wrong to be dishonest and unjust; it's wrong to use your brother as a means to an end; it's wrong to waste the precious life that God has given you in rioteous living, it is eternally and absolutely wrong; it's wrong to hate, it always has been wrong and it always will be wrong. It was wrong in two thousand B.C. and it's wrong in 1953 A.D. It's wrong in India, it's wrong in Russia, it's wrong in China, it's wrong in America. It always has been wrong and it always will be wrong.

A second thing that convinces me that modern man has strayed away from the principle that there is a moral order of the universe is that most people today have adopted a sort of pragmatic test of right and wrong; that is to say, whatever works is right. And so the only sin for the average modern man is to disobey the Eleventh
commandment "Thou shalt not get caught." It doesn't matter what you do, but just don't get caught. This attitude has lead to a philosophy of the survival of the slick-est. It says, it's all right to lie, but just do it with a bit of finess, it's alright to rob, but be a dignified robber. This philosophy has invaded the whole of modern life. But my friends we must come to see that some things are right and some things are wrong, whether we are caught or not. This universe hinges on moral foundations. There is something in this universe that justifies Carlyle in saying, "No lie can live forever." There is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." There is something which justifies James Russell Lowell in saying, "Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne, yet that scaffold sways the future." There is something in this universe that justifies the Biblical writer in saying, "You shall reap what you sow." God's universe has moral foundations and if we are to go forward we must go back and pick up this precious value.

Another principle that we have left behind and that we need to go back and rediscover is the principle that all reality has spiritual control. This simply means that we must rediscover the principle that there is a God behind the process of life, and that He has supreme control of His creation. In our age of materialism we have gotten away from this principle. You remember the text said that the parents of

6 Thomas Carlyle, The French Revolution (1837)
7 Bryant, "The Battlefield" (1839)
8 James Russell Lowell, "The Present Crisis" (1844) This passage, as well as the two earlier ones from Bryant and Carlyle, became a commonplace set piece in King's oratory. His phrasing closely resembles that in a sermon by Harry Emerson Fosdick titled "Why We Believe in God," in On Being Fit To Live With Sermons on Post-war Christianity (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), p. 94. "There is something in this universe besides matter and motion. There is something here that justifies Carlyle in saying, 'No lie can live forever', and Shakespeare in saying, 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, /Rough-hew them how we will', and Lowell in saying, 'Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,—/Yet that scaffold sways the future.'" In the published version of King's sermon "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," he corrected and lengthened his quotation from Thomas Carlyle (King, Strength to Love, p. 77).

9 Cf Galatians 6:7
10 In the 1960 version of this sermon, King added "There is something deep down in our tradition that reminds us that the basic thing about a man is not his specificity but his fundamentum. The basic thing about a man is his dignity and his worth to the Almighty God. Thereby we see a universality at the center of the Gospel. Then we find the Apostle Paul restating it on Mars' Hill: 'Out of one blood God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth.'" King continued, "This is the great American dream, a beautiful and a sublime dream. But the tragedy is that we have so often scarred the dream. We have trampled over the dream. And it is one of the ironies of history, that in a nation founded upon the principle that all men are created equal, men are still arguing over whether the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character." (King, "Going Forward by Going Backward," April–June 1960, p. 65).
11 In the 1960 version, King added "Now many people have overlooked this basic principle, and left it behind. Some have done it for very honest reasons. Some men have neglected it because they have looked out in the world and noticed the colossal and glaring reality of evil, that something that the poet Yeats calls 'the giant agony of the world,' and they have wondered how a good, all-powerful God could allow this evil to exist. Others have neglected it because they have found it difficult to square their intellectual world views with the sometimes irrational and unscientific dogmas of religion. And so there are some people who neglect this principle for honest reasons. But I suspect that most people neglect it..."
Jesus travelled a whole day before they missed him. They had unconsciously lost Jesus. So have we in the modern world unconsciously left God behind? We didn’t kneel before God and say “Good-bye God, we are going to leave you now, we are going to spend our time trying to get rich and in having a good time.” The materialism in America was an unconscious process. It began with the Industrial Revolution in England, then mass production, then the invention of gadgets such as automobiles, radios, movies and television. Man became more concerned about these gadgets than about God. Man became so involved in attempting to get a big bank account and riding in a big car that he unconsciously forgot God. Man became so involved in looking at the man made lights of the city that he unconsciously forgot to think about that great cosmic light that gets up in the eastern horizon and paints its technicolor across the blue, a light man could never make. He became so involved in the intricacies of television and movies that he unconsciously forgot to think about the beautiful stars that appear as shining silver pins sticking in the magnificent blue pin cushion. He became so fascinated with his scientific progress that he unconsciously came to believe that man could usher in a new world unaided by any divine power. And so when we came to ourselves, we had travelled a day’s journey and discovered that we had left God behind. My friends, if we are to go forward we must go back and find God. We must put God back in the center of our thinking. Television and automobiles, sub-ways and airplanes, dollars and cents, can never be substitutes for God, for long before any of these came into being, we needed God and after they will have passed away, we will still need God.

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

Preached at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, First Sunday, April 1954
Preached August 16, 1953

TDc CSKC Sermon file, folder 97

because they have just become involved in other things. These people are not theoretical doubters. They are not theoretical atheists. They are practical atheists.” (King, “Going Forward by Going Backward,” April–June 1960, p. 66)

12 King cites Isaac Watts’s hymn “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” (1719). In the 1960 version of this sermon, King used a different ending. “And since 1941, one tragedy then has followed another, as if history were designed to refute the vain delusions of modern man. Maybe H. G. Wells was right. ‘The man who is not religious begins at nowhere and ends at nothing,’ for religion is like a mighty wind that breaks down doors and knocks down walls, and makes that possible, and even easy, which seems difficult and impossible.” And so I say to you, discover God, and with this faith you will be able to adjourn the councils of despair, and bring new light to the dark chambers of pessimism.” He concluded, “This is the challenge. Reach out and grab it, not tomorrow, not next week, not next year, but this moment. Go back and find Him. A tiny little minute, just sixty seconds in it. / I didn’t choose it. I can’t refuse it. It’s up to me to use it. / A tiny little minute, just sixty seconds in it. / But eternity, eternity, eternity is in it.” Let us use the moment, and God will be with us” (King, “Going Forward by Going Backward,” April–June 1960, pp. 66–67)
Upon the people of Dexter Avenue
Baptist Church, I have called one to serve
as the mouth of your faith in Central
to the world, of your faith in Central. If I
were able to accept this call, it is
more than I can do. I accept this call, not
as the mouth of your faith in Central,
but as a sign of the people's responsibility
to the world. I accept this call, I accept the
responsibility of the apostles, their story and
of the imagination, other that the whole man.

King's notes for his acceptance address at Dexter (2 May 1954).
I come to you with nothing to offer. I have no special talents, no particular skill. It is with a deep sense of finiteness that I come before you. At every moment of my existence, I am conscious of your presence in the nature of circumstances employed in the nature of bringing me into your presence. I speak to you with only the claim to be a servant of truth, and a pledge of dependency on the good grace of my Lord. I am with the feeling that I have been called to do my small part. I have been called to do my small part in spreading the word of God, to be a leverage to lift the spirit of man from ignorance and bondage.

The whole of my life, I have felt with Jesus that the source of the power to do good work is the power of the Holy Spirit, the power to do good work is the power to lift the spirit of man from ignorance and bondage. I have felt with Jesus that the source of the power to do good work is the power of the Holy Spirit, the power to lift the spirit of man from ignorance and bondage.