



**The Role of Religion in  
the Civil Rights Movements**

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### The Church and Civil Rights

Faith in many instances has been the fuel that has fed the passionate flame in the fight for freedom. Our American history is replete with examples of people of faith, who have in a defiant manner, broken the vessels of traditional and sacred values in order to serve up revolutionary social change.

It is quite likely that in the background, if not the forefront, of every effort in the quest for justice, there have been people of faith providing support and leadership. In the founding of our nation, we see clear evidence that freedom of religion was interrelated to the desire for independence from Great Britain. The root of independence is respect for others. Therefore, it is quite consistent for those who value their freedom of faith to value freedom in broader areas of life. Those who simply value their freedom of faith with a narrow application and limited view towards others may not fully appreciate the roots of their own faith.

The church was not only the meeting place for the movement in the South, it also was the center of the movement in that it served as the symbol of the movement. That is to say that the church represented the freedom that the movement participants sought. It was a facility in the community beyond the control of the white power structure. It was a place where people could express themselves without reprisal. It was a place where people could speak the truth, where they could sing and even shout. The church was also served as the community bulletin board.

The white supremacist opposition was well aware of the power of the church in relation to the movement's resources. The economic, social, political, educational as well as spiritual power of the movement was embodied in the church.

It is no coincidence that most of the leaders in the forefront of the civil rights movement in the South were clergy or lay church leaders. Many of them were financially independent and therefore were able to represent an independent voice in the community. This independence

was under-girded by a prophetic progressive faith which led to accepting suffering as a necessary requirement in the struggle for justice and freedom.

These prophetic proponents of faith were dynamic, progressive, demonstrative visionaries, not prophets of doom. They were not only prognosticators but also proactivists.

Fearing this uncontrollable power, militant defenders of the status quo therefore reacted with fierce repressive measures. They arrested the people of faith. They beat them, hosed them down with water, and unleashed the dogs on them. They bombed their homes and churches. They shot and killed them, targeting the source of the power that was pressing for change.

### The Church Coming Together

The church was the place where different social and economic groups came together and became united in the cause of justice. The “haves” and the “have nots” found common ground and formed a bond and shared in each other’s suffering. The church in the Midwest and the

Northeast joined the faithful in the South. Black and white came together in the church, then poured out into the streets to make visible an enlarged character symbolizing the goals and dreams of the movement. They were prepared to give their lives for their beliefs and some did make the supreme sacrifice. The confidence they exhibited was inspired by the scriptures and their music. They sang “we shall overcome”, but they were also overcome by passion motivated by love, a love that was larger than them, a love that was borne and cradled by their faith. “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round”, a song that represented their faith, expressed the determination that sprang from their very souls.

“Woke Up This Morning With My Mind On Freedom” meant that they were subsumed with the passion starting with each wakening hour. Not only were they in the movement, the movement was in them. They had become the embodiment of the change for which they were striving. The songs articulated a power that they had discovered within themselves.

The themes of the movement grew out of the teachings of their religious orientation. Drawn from the church hymnals, “I’m On My Way To The Promised Land,” “Paul and Silas Bound in Jail,” “Wade In The Water,” “Over My Head I See Freedom In The Air,” are all themes that express the hope, aspirations, determination, and goals that energized the movement.

They sang in times of joy, in times of stress and disappointment, in times of uncertainty, even in times of danger and threat. The music served to unite the spirits of the participants, creating a bond that linked them with both contemporary and past generations. Like jazz and blues musicians they inscribed traditional tunes with new words and new meanings. Indeed, one way to determine whether a protest has become a movement is to observe whether the protesters have begun to sing their own songs.

### The Church On Its Feet

The concepts and strategies of the movement were taken directly from Biblical stories and admonitions. Marching as a method to express the power of the people and as a force to tear down the walls that represent barriers to freedom paralleled the march around the walls of Jericho. Wading in the water was transferred to facing the water hoses. Many of

the songs were songs that the slaves sang in their struggle to be free, suggesting a class connection between struggles of modern African Americans and the enslaved people of the Old Testament. The themes, the premises, the goals, the methodology, the theology are so similar that the modern day Civil Rights struggles can be viewed as a continuation of a centuries-long struggle rather than as a separate movement. The present manifestation of the movement is struggle with a new focus.

The rhetoric of the modern movement reflects universal values that transcend time and space.

In the Montgomery movement, the church took the lead in calling for a boycott of the buses in the face of disrespectful treatment and racially discriminatory seating patterns. The participants chose to walk in dignity rather than ride in disgrace. They accepted the suffering for a cause which they believed was right. They came to see the ill treatment on the Montgomery buses as immoral and their boycott as an example of moral indignation. They perceived themselves as walking in their faith. They felt that they were doing the will of God. They believed that they were walking with God, and that God was walking with them. Their inspiration came from their understanding of the scriptures and

scriptural relevance to their contemporary lives. They were caught up, not only in a social movement, but also in a religious movement born of the church and directed by church leaders.

Their songs, their prayers, their sermons, and their daily discussions reflect a new and expansive expression of their faith.

Beyond the immediate goal of changing the unjust policies regarding the buses, the Montgomery movement served to transform the self-image of thousands of participants. The concept of becoming maladjusted to the system of segregation on the buses led to a broader transformation of individual and collective identity. (“And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” Rom 12:2). Finding practical application for the scriptures, the participants gathered the resolve and determination to sustain the struggle as long as it took to end segregation on Montgomery buses.

When the Supreme Court decision was handed down outlawing segregation on the buses in Montgomery, one woman shouted out at a mass meeting: “The Lord done spoke from Washington”. She and so many others walked for 381 days, the scriptural wisdom: “But they that



wait upon the Lord shall renew their strengths, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isa. 40:31).

### The Church and the Sit-ins

The Sit-In movement that began in 1960, was led by students, but it was no less faith-based than the Montgomery struggle. Many of those who participated in the sit-ins were religious; some seminary students, and more than a few were college chaplains.

In Nashville, for example, the local affiliate of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference sponsored the workshops that trained the leadership of the Nashville Sit-In Movement. Student leaders from several campuses were trained by Rev. James Lawson, Jr. a divinity student from Vanderbilt. Another important motivation was Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, Sr. the pastor of First Baptist Church, a homiletic professor at the American Baptist Theological Seminary, and President of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council.

The students planned their action strategies at Clark Memorial Methodist Church, staged their sit-ins from First Baptist Church and collaborated with the church’s social action committee. Rev. Lawson, who had studied Gandhian in India as well as the Christian scriptures,

drew from the teachings of many faiths to fashion a curriculum for his nonviolent training course.

### The Freedom Rides - 1961

The Freedom Rides were the first movement of the 1960s to provide an opportunity for non-violent participation on a national level, to allow movement activities to come together in a single action that led them to jail and unmerited suffering (“And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them” Acts 16:25).

When Nashville students continued the Freedom Rides after the original CORE riders were attacked in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama the Freedom Rider movement became a broad struggle. People of faith from all over the nation joined the Freedom Rides and brought segregation in interstate travel to a halt by the end of 1961. With this victory the struggle for freedom and justice gained new strength and the climate for social change began to shift in the years that followed, the nation experienced major civil rights initiatives, from Birmingham to Mississippi to Selma that brought about significant changes.

The progress made during this period prompted a new awakening among faith-based communities across the nation. National church bodies began to re-examine their racial complexion. Some associations created social action committees to address local and national racial problems, and many seminaries began to make special efforts to recruit people of color and provide scholarships to attract them.

### Birmingham

Events in Birmingham and Washington DC in 1963 underscored the religious cast of the movement. The local Birmingham movement was sponsored by the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and was led by people of faith. This movement experienced many powerful symbols of religious orientation including the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, a local leader targeted by dynamite wielding Klansman and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church where a bomb took the lives of four little girls in September 1963.

People from other places and other faiths added spiritual force to the Birmingham movement.

The Rabbinical Council of St. Louis sent a large delegation of Rabbis to march in Birmingham, leaving only one Rabbi in St. Louis to handle emergencies.

The August 1963 March on Washington brought together the largest mass protest for Civil Rights in the nation's history. People of faith were represented in large numbers. The goals of the movement had become top priority for many national church bodies.

By the mid-1960s, Martin Luther King spoke for them all with an eloquent speech that still reverberates in the hearts and minds of justice advocates. It is the responsibility of the present generation of leaders to hold up the torch of freedom and justice and run the second mile.

At this brief survey of religion and the movement suggests, activists motivated by faith and scripture have played a large and continuing role in the struggle for racial justice in American life. Without the guiding force of religion and more principles rooted in faith and Judeo-Christian ethics, the Civil Rights movement, and the broader freedom struggle, would not have become the cornerstone of social change in modern America. Indeed, for the better part of a century the faith-based struggle to eradicate racial discrimination and injustice in the United States has been a major source of spiritual and more regeneration, of

hope and renewal, for oppressed peoples across the globe. Though much work is left to be done, both at home and abroad, doing God's work in Alabama, Mississippi, and other parts of the South through such worldly pursuits as sit-ins, freedom rides, and voter registration drives has spread the power and the glory of faith and righteousness to the ends of the earth, giving a measure of hope to us all.