

“Racism and Christianity in America (Part 11: 1955-1961)”

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The bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama continued on Tuesday. And on Wednesday. It continued into a second week ... then a third. Seven weeks in, a white man threw a bomb at King's house. King's wife and baby daughter were inside. The explosion filled the house with smoke and shattered glass. 300 blacks gathered around, demanding vengeance. King addressed them: “If you have weapons, take them home; if you do not have them, please do not seek to get them. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with nonviolence. Remember the words of Jesus: ‘He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.’ We must love our white brothers, no matter what they do to us.... ‘Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you.’ ... We must meet hate with love.” The mob dispersed, and the boycott continued.

So did the segregation of schools. 101 members of Congress, including every Senator and Representative from Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Virginia, signed a manifesto, accusing the Supreme Court of abusing its power and promising to prevent the implementation of their ruling that mandated the desegregation of schools. Year after year, black students tried to go to school with whites. Year after year, many were blocked. Some were protected by the National Guard. Nine black students in Little Rock were prevented *by* the National Guard, under orders from the Arkansas Governor. President Dwight Eisenhower intervened; he federalized the Guard, and ordered them to escort the “Little Rock Nine” into the school. A Norman Rockwell painting shows one girl being escorted to school, amid racial taunts. It's called, *The Problem We All Live With*.

Back in Montgomery, leaders of the bus boycott were arrested for conspiring to interfere with a business. King spent two weeks in jail. He said: “I was proud of my crime. It was the crime of joining my people in a nonviolent protest against injustice.” A federal district court later ruled that Alabama's bus segregation laws were unconstitutional. Alabama appealed. The Supreme Court affirmed the district court's decision. Montgomery relented. The boycott ended. It had lasted more than a year.

On Christmas Day, 1956, in Birmingham, sixteen sticks of dynamite exploded at the home of Fred Shuttlesworth, a black pastor and leader of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. The explosion destroyed his house. He survived. Later, when he and his wife tried to enroll their children in school, they were attacked, and she was stabbed. Later still, his church was bombed.

In February 1957, Martin Luther King, Fred Shuttlesworth, and numerous other black leaders formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an African-American civil rights organization. They adopted a principle of nonviolence: “Not one hair of one head of one person should be harmed.”

Racist whites felt differently. In Montgomery, someone fired a shotgun through King's front door; a black teenage girl was attacked by whites as she exited a bus; snipers shot at other buses; five

black churches were bombed; a black man was lynched by the KKK; Rosa Parks received death threats. The city suspended bus service until the violence subsided. The city also passed an ordinance forbidding blacks and whites from playing games together: no cards, no dice, no basketball, no football, no swimming, no *nothing*. Fearing for their safety, blacks started riding at the back of the bus again.

In May 1957, the NAACP and the SCLC held a prayer vigil in front of the Lincoln Memorial. 25,000 people attended. King spoke – his first speech before a national audience. “Give us the ballot and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights.... Give us the ballot and we will no longer plead to the federal government for passage of an anti-lynching law.... Give us the ballot and we will fill our legislative halls with men of good will.... Give us the ballot and we will place judges on the benches of the South who will do justly and love mercy.... Give us the ballot and we will quietly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court's decision.”

Congress adopted a Civil Rights Act in 1957, the first such act in 82 years. It was intended to provide federal protection for voting rights for blacks. But it was limited in scope, and didn't help much. Congress adopted another one in 1960. It was better – but still far too weak to make much difference.

In 1958 and 59, two Youth Marches in Washington promoted school integration. 10,000 people attended the first; 26,000 were at the second. Martin Luther King was going to speak at the first – but then he got stabbed, and had to back out. His wife, Coretta Scott King, spoke in his stead. At the second, he called for legislative action “to insure the orderly and speedy integration of schools.”

In July 1958, a group of black students in Wichita, Kansas entered a drug store and sat down at a lunch counter. Blacks could purchase bagged lunches, but were not allowed to sit at the counters, or to eat or drink from plates and glasses that whites used. The students had practiced what they would do ahead of time in the basement of a church. They sat there – for hours at a time, day after day, ignoring taunts and threats hurled at them by whites. It was the first organized sit-in. And it worked. Three weeks in, the manager allowed them to be served. A week later, students in Oklahoma City launched another successful sit-in. In February 1960, four black students in Greensboro, North Carolina began a sit-in at a lunch counter in Woolworth's. The next day, twenty black students participated. The third day, there were *sixty*. The fourth day, there were *three hundred*. By the sixth day, there were over *one thousand*. Sit-ins sprung up in Nashville, Richmond, and other cities throughout the South. Some of them lasted for months. In Nashville, one of the participants was a 21-year-old named John Lewis. You've heard of him – he became the United States Congressman who died last month. He and other students were attending nonviolence training workshops that were held at a United Methodist Church.

In December 1960, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in restaurants and waiting areas in terminals serving buses that cross state lines was illegal. The ruling went ignored and unenforced. A few months later, a group of 13 young adults – seven black and six white – boarded two buses in Washington, heading south. John Lewis was among them. They called themselves the Freedom Riders. They fully expected that some of them would get arrested when they tried to enter areas in terminals that were illegally designated “whites only.” In South Carolina, Lewis was assaulted by two white men when he did that. In Anniston, Alabama, a mob of KKK members attacked the first bus. It was a Sunday, and some of those KKK members were still wearing the clothes they had worn to church. The mob slashed the bus's tires, threw a firebomb into the bus, and held the doors shut – trying to trap the riders inside. The riders escaped the bus, but were beaten by the mob. When the second bus arrived a little later, eight KKK members beat the riders senseless. Most of the victims were refused treatment at the

local hospital. Fred Shuttlesworth came to their rescue, and the ride continued. When they reached Birmingham, another mob attacked them. Bull Connor, the police commissioner, had told the KKK they could have 15 minutes with the riders before the police showed up. The riders were assaulted with baseball bats, iron pipes, and bicycle chains. One rider needed 50 stitches in his head – but the first hospital he was taken to refused to treat him. At this point, the Attorney General stepped in; this was Robert Kennedy, brother of President John Kennedy. Robert arranged for an escort to get the riders to Montgomery, but the bus drivers refused to go any further. The riders then tried to board a plane to get to New Orleans, their ultimate destination, but then there was a bomb threat, and they had to evacuate.

Three days later, a new set of riders, undeterred, boarded a bus and headed for Birmingham, to pick up where the first ride had stopped. Bull Connor arrested them, took them Tennessee border, and left them there. They made their way back to Birmingham. The Kennedy Administration pressured the bus company to find a driver, and the Alabama State Highway Patrol to protect the bus from mobs and snipers. So the ride continued. When they reached Montgomery, the Highway Patrol abandoned the bus. It pulled into the station; a mob was waiting for them; the riders were beaten with baseball bats and iron pipes. Someone bludgeoned John Lewis with a crate on his head. Another rider's teeth were knocked out. The police didn't show up for a *long* time. Ambulances refused to take the wounded to the hospital. The next night, 1500 people crowded into a black Baptist church in Montgomery to honor the Freedom Riders. While Fred Shuttlesworth and Martin Luther King spoke to the crowd, a mob of 3000 whites attacked the church, breaking windows, throwing tear gas, threatening to burn it. City and state police did *nothing* to help. President Kennedy told the Governor he would send in federal troops if the state did not intervene. The Alabama National Guard finally showed up, and dispersed the mob.

And the ride continued. A few days later two buses left Montgomery, heading for Jackson, Mississippi, escorted by Highway Patrol and the National Guard. Unbeknownst to the riders, Kennedy had gotten the Governors of Alabama and Mississippi to agree to protect the riders from mob violence. In exchange, the state police would be allowed to arrest the riders when they entered the "whites-only" areas at bus stations. So the buses safely reached Jackson, and the riders were arrested. They decided not to post bail, refusing to pay fines for their unlawful arrests. The Kennedys then called for a "cooling off period" and called the rides "unpatriotic." James Farmer, the leader of CORE, responded: "We have been cooling off for 350 years, and if we cooled off any more, we'd be in a deep freeze."

There were many more Freedom Rides that summer. Most headed towards Jackson. Hundreds of riders were arrested. Once the jails were full, riders were placed in the Mississippi State Penitentiary. They suffered abuse; they sang freedom songs; some were placed in maximum security; prison officials took away their mattresses, sheets, toothbrushes – basically everything but their underwear; at one point the prison was holding more than 300 riders. Ultimately, in November, the Interstate Commerce Commission ruled that "no bus facility, bus, or driver could deny access to its facilities based on race," and buses posted certificates saying "Seating aboard this vehicle is without regard to race, color, creed, or national origin." Segregation in the bus industry had ended. *One* victory had finally been won.

It is amazing how *tenaciously* the South tried to maintain segregation, what incredible *effort* was expended to prevent blacks from exercising their Constitutional rights. It is also amazing how many blacks learned to practice non-violence, while many whites engaged in mob violence, hurled bombs, or committed gross injustice. It's as if the South *thought* they were trying to preserve something *sacred*...

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