

“Racism and Christianity in America (Part 12: 1961-1965)”

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Segregation affected everything – even public libraries. In March 1961, nine black college students peacefully entered the library in Jackson, Mississippi. The staff told the students to go to the “colored” library, and the police arrested them for “breach of the peace.” When the students were brought to the courthouse, a hundred black residents cheered for them. The police let loose with clubs and dogs. The NAACP filed a lawsuit; a federal judge ordered the library to desegregate, and the American Library Association issued a statement that membership in the Association had to be open to everyone regardless of race, religion, or personal belief. In response, five states withdrew from the ALA.

In November, a group of black students in Albany, Georgia entered the “whites only” waiting room at the bus terminal. The segregation of bus terminals should have ended ... but it hadn’t. They were denied entry. They filed a complaint. A few weeks later, they tried again, and were arrested. That led to mass demonstrations; 500 people were arrested; Martin Luther King was called in to assist. He was arrested, charged with obstructing the sidewalk and parading without a permit. He posted bail after the city agreed to make some concessions – an agreement which the city broke. At King’s trial, he was given a choice: pay a \$178 fine, or spend 45 days in jail. He chose jail. Three days later, Billy Graham paid his fine. Yes, *that* Billy Graham, the Southern Baptist evangelist. King and Graham were good friends; Graham had been advising King and other members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for several years. Graham was strongly opposed to segregation; he had torn down ropes that his staff members had put up at crusades to divide the races from each other; at one of his events, he said to a white audience, “we have been proud and thought we were better than any other race, any other people. Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to stumble into hell because of our pride.”

Also in 1961, James Meredith, a highly qualified black student, tried to enroll at the University of Mississippi. He was denied admission twice. The Supreme Court ordered the school to admit him. The Mississippi governor declared, “no school will be integrated in Mississippi while I am your governor.” The Mississippi legislature quickly passed a law allowing universities to deny admission to any person guilty of a crime. Meredith was arrested on a trumped-up charge, and convicted. The truth was found out; the Governor was found guilty of civil contempt, arrested, and fined \$10,000 a day until he relented. *Hundreds* of federal troops accompanied Meredith to the university for his enrollment. Whites rioted; they burned cars; they pelted federal officers; they destroyed university property; they killed two civilians. Meredith persevered through mistreatment and isolation, and graduated in 1963.

In 1963, George Wallace, the Governor of Alabama, called for “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” In Birmingham, Fred Shuttlesworth launched a boycott, calling for an end to segregation in public facilities, restaurants, schools, and stores. Bull Connor, the Commissioner of Public Safety, barred the protests, an act which Shuttlesworth called “flagrant denial of our

constitutional rights.” The protest leaders talked and prayed. King was among them. They decided to continue. On Good Friday, King and about 50 Birmingham residents were arrested and jailed. Using scraps of paper and the margins of a newspaper, King wrote an open letter to eight white clergy who had objected to the protests. It is a detailed essay about justice and injustice; it is, frankly, a theological *masterpiece*; it ought to be required reading for every citizen of this country and every Christian around the world. I wish I had time to read you the whole thing. Here, in brief, are three of its key points:

First, on laws: “A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.... A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law.” The Boston Tea Party was *illegal*; what Hitler did in Germany was *legal*. Just because something is a *law* doesn’t make it *right*. “Law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and ... when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.”

On the black experience: “We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights.... Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, ‘Wait.’ But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, ... and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: ‘Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?’; ... when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading ‘white’ and ‘colored’; ... when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments ... then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.”

And on the church: “I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership.... On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward.... Over and over I have found myself asking: ‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?’ ... There was a time when the church was very powerful – in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.... Things are different now. So often the contemporary church ... is an archdefender of the status quo.”

College, high school and elementary students in Birmingham began walking from school to City Hall, with the goal of talking with the mayor about segregation. Bull Connor arrested 1200 of them, some as young as eight years old. The next day, Connor used high-pressure fire hoses and police dogs against the children. That Sunday, blacks started showing up at white churches to pray. Some churches let them stay. Other churches kicked them out. A few days later, after more fire hoses and arrests, with the eyes of the world watching, the city agreed to desegregate lunch counters, drinking fountains, fitting rooms, and restrooms, and hire blacks in stores as salespeople and clerks. The next day, a bomb

exploded at the hotel where King had been staying. Blacks began rioting; King called for nonviolence.

In June, Governor Wallace stood in a doorway at the University of Alabama, trying to block two black students from enrolling. That night, President Kennedy gave an address, advocating for a new civil rights bill. It was a major shift in policy; he was endorsing the civil rights movement as a moral issue.

In August, 250,000 people gathered in Washington, DC to advocate for civil and economic rights. Ten speakers addressed the crowd at the Lincoln Memorial. Six of them had just met with President Kennedy. One speaker was 23-year-old John Lewis. Another was Eugene Carson Blake, a Presbyterian minister and former President of the National Council of Churches. The last was Martin Luther King. “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’ I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi ... will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.... I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists ... little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

Less than three weeks later, a bomb exploded at Fred Shuttlesworth’s church in Birmingham. It had been placed there by the Ku Klux Klan. It was a Sunday morning. Four young girls were killed.

Nine weeks after that, John F. Kennedy was killed. Lyndon B. Johnson picked up his mantle. First came the 24th Amendment, which prohibited states from requiring voters to pay poll taxes to vote in federal elections. Then, overcoming massive resistance in the Senate, came the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin; it prohibited unequal application of voter registration requirements; and it prohibited racial segregation in schools, employment, and public accommodations. It was challenged in the courts; the Supreme Court upheld it.

There were many other important moments in the civil rights movement. I can’t possibly cover them all. But this one’s critical: in 1965, an unarmed black man in Alabama was beaten, shot, and killed by a policeman during a nonviolent protest about voting rights. His death inspired a march to the state capital in Montgomery. As the marchers crossed a bridge in Selma, they were blocked by a wall of state troopers and a posse of other whites. The marchers asked to talk; their request was denied; they were assaulted with clubs and tear gas. John Lewis was one of the march’s leaders; his skull was fractured. The marchers tried again two days later, now accompanied by clergy from around the country. One minister was killed. President Johnson addressed Congress in a nationally televised speech, calling for a new voting rights law. The march resumed a few days later, now with federal protection. Four days later, 25,000 marchers arrived at the Alabama State Capitol. Martin Luther King spoke. He had recently won the Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership of nonviolent resistance to racial prejudice. “How long will it take? ... How long will prejudice blind the visions of men...? ... How long will justice be crucified?”

Johnson’s Voting Rights Act was signed into law in August 1965. A series of detailed provisions eliminated all the discriminatory practices that had been used to prevent blacks from voting. It has been called the single most effective piece of civil rights legislation ever passed by Congress. 95 years after the 15th Amendment had been adopted, black voters *finally* could no longer be denied the ballot.

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