

Lesson Title: Evaluating Nonviolence as a Method of Social Change

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Historiography: Kaye Wise Whitehead
Grade: 9th – 12th Grades
Unit: The Civil Rights Movement 1954–1972
Lesson Duration: One 90-minute period

Historiography:

The use of nonviolence as an organizing mechanism has its roots in the early Christian church. The disciples, acting on the belief that Jesus Christ had died and rose again, journeyed across the lands witnessing and ministering. They were severely attacked and consciously chose to do as their Teacher had taught them to do, which was to meet violence with love and patience.¹ Mohandes “Mahatma” Gandhi, a lawyer turned activist who led the struggle for India’s independence from British rule, was the first person in modern day history to apply the concept of nonviolence as an organizing tool.² His commitment to his cause, his willingness to suffer so that all might be free, and his courage to remain nonviolent in the face of violence are lessons that have been learned and applied by other 20th Century leaders. Among the most notable are the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the struggle for civil rights in the United States and Nelson Mandela in South Africa’s resistance to the apartheid system. The concept of nonviolence worked in these two countries even in the face of violent opposition.

The Civil Rights Movement chose to utilize the nonviolent strategy in an attempt to change the racial, political and social climate. In the face of overwhelming and sometimes deadly violence, the leaders of the Movement remained committed to nonviolent principles. In 1941, James Farmer, a former divinity student³ began working as the race relations secretary of a pacifist group, the Fellowship of Reconciliation. One

year later, along with a group of University of Chicago students, Farmer founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the first Black protest organization that utilized nonviolent and passive resistant techniques. The techniques were successfully applied in 1943, when CORE staged the first sit-in demonstration at a Chicago restaurant. They soon added to their nonviolent tactics the “standing line” technique, which involved patiently and persistently waiting in line to be served. Since he was active in a number of civil rights demonstrations, Farmer’s nonviolent ideologies became well-known throughout the 1950s. He worked as a program director for the NAACP, a writer for the *Crises*⁴ magazine and in 1958 Farmer was one of five-men to be selected by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions to visit fifteen African countries. Although CORE was the first organization to apply nonviolence as a technique in the American struggle for civil rights, it was not until it was used by Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) that it would become the most consistent and effective strategy employed in the struggle for civil rights.

In 1955, as a result of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which was when Black people staged a successful nonviolent protest for 382 days to break the yoke of segregation, Dr. King, as a nonviolent strategist and organizer, was introduced to the world. His nonviolent stance in the face of constant harassment, numerous arrests and the bombing of his home, set the stage for the essence of the nonviolent movement. Dr. King, the son of a minister⁵ and a former schoolteacher, decided to pursue the ministry while attending Morehouse College, where he was directly influenced by the work and legacy of Dr. Benjamin Mays^{6,7}. King went on to attend Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, PA and received his doctorate in theology in 1955. In his essay, “Pilgrimage to

Nonviolence,” King describes his journey toward nonviolent resistance as an intellectual progression that began when he studied Gandhi, continued with his study of social activism and Karl Marx’s theories of capitalism and the dispossessed, and included his understanding of the theories of pacifism. These theories resonated with King’s Christian beliefs; he wrote, “My study of Gandhi convinced me that true pacifism is not resistance to evil, but nonviolent resistance to evil.”⁸ His philosophy of nonviolence required courage in the face of an adversary; and, it required the protestor to meet aggression with pacifism in an effort to shame the aggressor and encourage social reform.

It is important to note that although King and the Civil Rights Movement introduced the nation to the nonviolent strategy, the strategy would not have worked if the volunteers had not been committed to it. This was not a struggle of one man against the system. It was the struggle of a nation’s oppressed people against the invisible lines that separated the society into two parts, one white and free, the other Black and not.⁹ It is also important to clarify the meaning of nonviolence. It was not the same thing as being nonresistant or being submissive. It was a conscious act to “turn the other cheek,” “to love your neighbor” and to willingly accept suffering without inflicting it.¹⁰ In short, it went against the violent strategies that had been employed in America since the first settlers came and forcibly took the land away from the Native Americans.

At the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, which was built upon hundreds of years of suffering by Black people across the country,¹¹ thousands of Black and white volunteers successfully and consistently applied the nonviolent strategy. In 1957, King and a number of Black ministers met in New Orleans and established the SCLC as a coordinating agency for organizations and individuals who were actively involved in

nonviolent protests. The goal was to gain full citizenship rights for all Black people by using nonviolent direct mass action. The organization encouraged Black people to “refuse to cooperate with evil” and to “accept Christian love in full knowledge of its power to defy evil.”¹²

The theory of nonviolence was actively applied later that year, months after The Prayer Pilgrimage¹³, when nine students attempted to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. They were met daily by violent white mobs and had to be escorted to school by paratroopers. Violence continued to occur throughout the year but the students remained nonviolent and were later awarded the NAACP’s Spingarn Award for their bravery and courage in the face of overwhelming challenge. It was not until three years later that the theory of nonviolence was widely applied by those involved in the Civil Rights Movement, with or without the underlying Christian beliefs, and was seen as an effective strategy in the struggle against racism and segregation. Nonviolence was the strategy in Greensboro, North Carolina when four Black college students staged a sit-in movement at Woolworth’s lunch counter. Initially a very peaceful protest, the scene became increasingly violent as white mobs gathered to harass, beat and humiliate the protestors. This first sit-in ignited a movement that would quickly spread across the South. Demonstrators were trained in how to take their seats at the counters; how to submit themselves to the heckling and harassment from the white mobs; and, in how to meet violence—which included armed assault, being arrested, and being sprayed with firehoses—without fighting back. The sit-ins, which continued across the South for about two years, were eventually successful, with more than seventeen school districts and a number of stores, beaches, libraries and movie theaters integrating.¹⁴

The success of the sit-in movement set the stage for the Freedom Rides. In 1961, Farmer and twelve other CORE volunteers boarded buses in Washington, DC en route to New Orleans, Louisiana in an effort to test the Nation's compliance with the United States Supreme Court's 1960 *Boynton v. Virginia* decision.¹⁵ As the buses rode through the South, they were met by violent mobs and were beaten, harassed and jailed. Even though they were in constant danger, they effectively utilized the nonviolent strategy while the world watched and waited. When the first Freedom Ride ended unsuccessfully, a number of Black and white volunteers from other civil rights organizations answered the call and finished the ride. Four months after the Freedom Rides finally ended, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued an order banning segregation in interstate terminal facilities.

Although Dr. King was involved in the strategy sessions for the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, it was not until 1963 that the SCLC, as an organization, became actively involved in its first successful nonviolent protest.¹⁶ At that time, civil rights demonstrations were beginning to happen across the South. Successes in Montgomery, Alabama¹⁷; in Greensboro, North Carolina¹⁸ and in Washington, DC¹⁹, had helped Black people to realize that nonviolent protests had the power to make changes. Dr. King and the SCLC then planned to openly attack racism, in a one of the most violent and racist cities in the nation at the time, Birmingham, Alabama.²⁰ The SCLC thus organized and launched Project C (for confrontation). The demonstration began on April 12, 1963 with Dr. King, Rev. Ralph Abernathy and hundreds of volunteers getting arrested for defying the court's injunction against marching. While in jail, Dr. King wrote (on the edges of an edition of the *Birmingham News*) his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," which outlined

the history of nonviolence as used by the early Christians, Gandhi and now Black people in America.²¹ Dr. King wrote that he was in Birmingham because there was injustice in Birmingham and that his desire, like the early Christians, was to carry the gospel of freedom beyond his home town.²²

After he was released, the second half of the plan, which called for an organized escalation of protest and civil disobedience, was put into place. Demonstrators began with small sit-ins which were designed to publicize the goal of desegregation. A boycott of downtown businesses followed. In addition, Dr. King and the SCLC held nightly mass meetings to energize the protestors, and nightly mass marches to fill the Birmingham jails with protestors (and overwhelm law enforcement agencies). If needed, organizers planned to completely overwhelm the city with outsiders in order to bring media attention. The plan hinged on the SCLC's ability to continuously increase the pressure on authorities by having their protestors remain in jail for an average of five or six days at a time in order to call attention to the injustices of segregation.

Project C, as a whole, rested on the principle of nonviolent resistance. In Birmingham, the resolve of the SCLC and the Civil Rights Movement would be severely tested as Public Safety Commissioner T. Eugene "Bull" Connor and the Birmingham police turned to increasingly violent tactics in order to break the power of the campaign. The crucial moment came when Dr. King and the leaders of the SCLC made the controversial decision to use high school students and other school children on the front lines of the demonstrations. Over 700 students and children were arrested and more than 2,500 students marched the next day. With the jails overwhelmed, the Birmingham police and Connor countered the constant flow of demonstrators with two new weapons: fire

hoses and police dogs. Nationally and internationally, the news media splashed images of young students and children being assaulted by these violent tactics. Pressure from the media attention and the economic boycott mounted, eventually forcing Birmingham's leadership to reach a compromise with the SCLC to end segregation in public accommodations and to establish a formal dialogue between white and Black leaders.

The media coverage in Birmingham provided the first occasion when the world saw and reacted to the use of violence to confront and challenge a nonviolent movement. As a result, many moderate and conservative Blacks who had previously not involved themselves in the Civil Rights Movement now joined those who had. The success in Birmingham laid the foundation for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and two months later, President John F. Kennedy submitted a new and broadened civil rights program to Congress.²³

This major success laid the groundwork for applying nonviolent tactics during the 1964 Freedom Summer voter registration and education drive in McComb, Mississippi²⁴, the 1965 "stand-in" at the Dallas County Courthouse²⁵ and the first and second marches from Selma to Montgomery²⁶, to name just a few of the demonstrations.²⁷ It is important to note that the acceptance of the nonviolent strategy, which had initially been utilized by all of the civil rights organizations, began to change in 1966, when Stokely Carmichael and the leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began to call for a more direct action approach to racism. This "Black Power" strategy, which later divided CORE, SCLC and the NAACP into two camps, was picked up by young people across the nation. Carmichael was openly critical of the nonviolent strategy and believed that a more militant approach was necessary. He defined Black Power as the necessary

element for social, political and economic change for Black people. SNCC's stance only served to heighten the differences between those who believed, like King and Farmer, that nonviolence was an extension of Christianity and those who believed, like Carmichael and John Lewis, that nonviolence was an organizing tactic that was applied only when it would work. Even with these challenges to nonviolence, the successes that occurred during the modern Civil Rights Movement²⁸ can be traced directly to Dr. King and the thousands of Black and white volunteers who successfully applied, over and over again, the strategies of nonviolence.

¹ See the "Sermon on the Mound" in the King James Version of the Holy Bible for further insight into Jesus Christ's teaching on nonviolence.

² *Time* magazine's article on Mahatma Gandhi being selected as a runner-up in their "Person of the Century" contest offers an interesting insight into his life, his personal habits and how he practiced his faith. http://www.time.com/time/time100/poc/magazine/mohandas_gandhi12c.html (accessed July 22, 2006)

³ James Farmer attended Howard University's School of Religion and received his Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1964. He received ordination because he did not want to practice in a segregated ministry. The Negro Almanac. Ploski, Harry A. and Brown, Roscoe C. Jr., eds. New York: Bellwether Publishing Company, Inc. 1967. p176

⁴ The NAACP launched *Crises* magazine in November, 1910. The first editor was William Edward Burghardt DuBois, who stated that the magazine would serve as both a newspaper and as a review of opinion and literature. See <http://www.thecrisismagazine.com/about.htm> (accessed July 28, 2006) for further information.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Sr. was the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

⁶ In 1934, Dr. Mays was appointed the Dean of the School of Religion at Howard University. He served for six years before becoming the President of Morehouse College, where he served for twenty-seven years.

⁷ The Negro Almanac, 177

⁸ See "My Pilgrimage to Freedom" *Fellowship* 24. September 1958 to read the entire text. http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/about_the_project/contact/email.fft (accessed July 22, 2006)

⁹ The 1968 report from the Kerner Commission actually predicted that if America did not commit more resources to solving the race problem (specifically housing, education and employment issues) then "catastrophes" would happen. Christian, Charles M. Black Saga: The African American Experience. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995. p440 The fact that this was released only a few months before Dr. King was assassinated makes it easy to wonder if that was one of the catastrophes that they were predicting. Arguably, Dr. King's death did dramatically change the force and power of the Civil Rights

Movement.

¹⁰ For greater insight into his philosophies, access “The King Papers Project” at The University of Stanford website. http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/about_the_project/contact/email.fft (accessed July 22, 2006)

¹¹ Black people have a history of resistance to the American system. Dating back as far as 1657, Black people have worked to change their social, political and economic status in this country.

¹² The Negro Almanac, 177

¹³ This was the first large-scale Black protest in Washington, DC in the post-war era. Led by Dr. King, more than 15,000 demonstrators met to protest the violence against southern activists and to urge the passage of the pending Civil Rights Act of 1957.

¹⁴ Black Saga, 405

¹⁵ The United States Supreme Court ruled that segregation in bus terminals serving interstate passengers was illegal.

¹⁶ Although the SCLC was involved in the 1961 Albany campaign, many believed that the campaign was a failure because it did not raise the national support that was needed to challenge and change the political system.

¹⁷ In 1955, Black people launched a year-long massive bus boycott after Rosa Parks, a NAACP secretary, refused to give up her seat to a white man on the bus.

¹⁸ On February 1, 1961, four black students from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State College entered Woolworth’s and sat down to protest against segregation. This “nonviolent” stand against oppression launched sit-in movements across the nation.

¹⁹ In 1961, thirteen freedom riders set off on public buses bound for the south to test discrimination in public terminals. They were met by violence and arrests but more volunteers joined and they eventually finished the ride. The final result was that the Interstate Commerce Commission issued an order banning segregation in interstate terminal facilities.

²⁰ Birmingham was actually nicknamed “Bombingham” because of the constant use of violence towards civil rights activists and the exceptionally high number of bombings that occurred within the city. Levy, Peter B. The Civil Rights Movement. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998. p19

²¹ Originally written as a response to a letter that he received from white clergyman who urged him to stop protesting in Birmingham, it quickly became the rallying cry for the nonviolent movement. See http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html (accessed July 22, 2006) for the full text.

²² Ibid, paragraph 3

²³ It was eventually pushed through Congress and signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964.

²⁴ Led by Robert Moses, thousands of Black and white students, many from the North, converged in Mississippi for a massive voter education and registration campaign and to establish Freedom Schools across the state.

²⁵ Four hundred prospective Black voters, led by Dr. King and John Lewis, showed up at the County Courthouse to protest unjust registration tests which were designed to keep Black people from voting.

²⁶ Six hundred volunteers, on what has been called “Bloody Sunday,” were beaten back by state troopers and sheriff deputies as they attempted to cross Edmund Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River. The second march was led by Dr. and Mrs. King and took place as a symbolic gesture for unity. *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*. Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., eds. New York: Perseus Books Group, 1999. p1766

²⁷ For further information, see the *Africana* section on the Civil Rights Movement or see NVLP’s *Impact of the Civil Rights Movement* lesson plan.

²⁸ The modern Civil Rights Movement is generally accepted as the years between 1954 and the early 1970s. See NVLP’s *Impact of the Civil Rights Movement* lesson plan for a more in-depth discussion.

Annotated Bibliography

Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.

This riveting account of Dr. King’s development as a political leader and cultural icon gives comprehensive insight on his actions and words.

Dudziak, Mary L. “Birmingham, Addis Ababa, and the Image of America: International Influence on U.S. Civil Rights Politics in the Kennedy Administration,” in Brenda Gayle Plummer, editor, *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights and Foreign Affairs 1945-1988*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003. pgs 81 - 200

This article asserts that Kennedy’s sympathy for civil rights stemmed primarily from his concern over America’s image world-wide during the Cold War. The brutal events in Birmingham, followed closely by the first meeting of new African leaders in Addis Ababa, became a focal point for African and world criticism of American racial policies.

Franklin, John Hope and Alfred Moss, Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Knopf, 2000. (8th edition)

A comprehensive history of Black Americans from the 1600s to the 1980s, this detailed account of Black History provides fundamental information on the Civil Rights Movement.

http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/about_king/encyclopedia/birmingham_campaign.htm

This complete account of the Birmingham campaign gives details and chronology as well as links to other entries in Stanford University’s *Encyclopedia of the Civil Rights Movement*.