

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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**The Moral
Foundation of
the Civil Rights
Movement**

By The Reverend Buster Soaries



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The Moral Foundation of the Civil Rights Movement

By The Reverend Buster Soaries

I am so glad to be here in Washington, the city where all the talking takes place. And I am particularly thrilled and honored to be invited to participate in this lecture series of The Heritage Foundation in pursuit of expanding our knowledge of African American history.

I am so glad to be here after Bob Woodson. It takes so much pressure off. It doesn't matter what I say because it has all been said. I am thrilled to be here. It is quite unique to have been given 30 to 45 minutes to explain. It's been my experience to come to these kinds of places and be given about 18 minutes to do what any black preacher needs at least 30 minutes to do. I think that's probably why I went to Princeton Seminary. So I could learn how to preach a good 12 minute sermon. So I can leave my Princeton text behind and bring my Baptist text with me.

But it is commendable, first, that The Heritage Foundation would see a need to reflect, along with us, on the legacy of our people and to attempt to add to traditional wisdom with regard to the meaning and the substance of that tradition. It also is extremely significant that you would be here, for a lecturer without an audience is like a ship without a sail. I am deeply appreciative for your taking time from your lunch hour to come and hear what I have to say.

It was in April of 1968 that I stopped by my grandmother's house on my way home from school. When I walked into her house I saw her sitting at the dining room table. And I saw something I had never seen before. I saw my grandmother sitting at the dining room table and she had tears in her eyes. And I thought to myself, I have never seen my grandmother cry before.

Grandmother's Emotion. My grandmother grew up through the Depression with eight children. She was a domestic worker, she made \$100 a week working in rich folks' houses scrubbing floors. Children called her by her first name. But I had never seen my grandmother cry. Her husband, my grandfather, was an alcoholic. She didn't put him out of the house, but she put him out of the bedroom. He slept on the porch. He got drunk every day. I never saw him go to work a day in my life. My mother never saw her father go to work a day in her life. Yet through all of that pain, we had never seen my grandmother cry.

She had lost two children. She had buried two of her sons. And at the funeral I was astounded by the resilience and the strength of my grandmother. I watched her watch them lower her babies into the ground. And through it all I never saw my grandmother cry.

And I looked at her and it was so astounding and so unique. My grandmother who had been strong for all of these years had tears rolling down her cheeks. I approached my grandmother and asked what could have happened that she would be sitting here all by her-

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self in her dining room with tears in her eyes. And she looked back at me, and she said four words, she said "They shot Dr. King."

And I was confused. Here I was seventeen years old, living in New Jersey, going to Grandmother's house to get some sweet potato pie. She was sitting at her dining room table. She had never met Dr. King. She didn't belong to his church. My grandmother wasn't even Baptist. She was a member of the Church of God in Christ, a high Pentecostal, legalistic black denomination. She didn't even know Dr. King.

Accomodationist Thought. My grandmother wasn't involved in the civil rights movement. She wasn't a member of the NAACP. My grandmother would never march, go to jail. My grandmother didn't advocate any kind of protest. My grandmother represented an accomodationist kind of thought: Go to work. Do your job. Stay in your place. My grandmother wasn't a part of that crowd that supported people like King.

And it was confusing to me. How could my grandmother, this woman who would have never voted for a candidate who supported abortion; my grandmother, who didn't allow the TV on Sunday; my grandmother, who was against brazen, brash behavior; who taught against civil disobedience; my grandmother, who would never enter a church without a hat on her head -- how could this quiet, conservative mother be so moved at the death of this rebel-rousing, liberal theologian. It was quite perplexing. Her tears troubled me. As I grew older and began to study the civil rights movement, I came to understand why my grandmother was crying on April 4, 1968. And I came to understand the moral foundations of the civil rights movement.

Those tears took me back to Rosa Parks. You remember Rosa Parks. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was sitting in the middle of the bus, the place where black folks could sit until so many white folks got on the bus that they had to give up their seats. What really happened on December 1, 1955? Well, Rosa Parks decided to sit down. But if we read history, it is clear that much more than that happened.

Parks' Predecessor. Rosa Parks was not the first black woman who decided to sit down. She wasn't the first woman who resisted the order to surrender her seat for a white person. As a matter of fact, in that same year, if you read Taylor Branch's account in *Parting the Waters*, if you read David Garrow's account in *Bearing the Cross*, that same year in March of 1955, there was another woman, Claudette Colvin, who did the same thing.

Claudette was sitting in the same section of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama. It was the same year, March 1955. The bus driver stopped and ordered her to get up for a white man to take her seat. She said, "No." But Claudette Colvin said no in a different way than Rosa Parks said no.

Rosa Parks was a meek and humble and quiet lady like my grandmother. Claudette was a different kind of sister. She was the kind of person, I imagine, who when you said move, she would bow her head and say, "You move me."

Claudette was a tough sister. And as the account goes, Claudette responded with such profanity and vulgarity that it embarrassed the white folks *and* the black folks on the bus. They called the police on Claudette, and they arrested Claudette like they did Rosa Parks. And they called the black leadership in Montgomery. The same black leadership that met later that year and organized the bus boycott.

And when they called the black leadership in Montgomery in March they called A.D. Nixon. And he called the other leaders and they got together to decide what to do. They had

been waiting for an opportunity to bring down the oppressive regime in Montgomery, Alabama. Now they had an example of how bad this situation was:

A young black woman riding on the bus refuses to get up. They arrested her and took her to jail.

Wrong Symbol. The black leadership of Montgomery, Alabama made a decision. They decided to advise sister Claudette to pay her fine. They advised her that because her language and her behavior had been so boisterous and vulgar, she didn't represent the kind of person that the community of Montgomery could use as a symbol.

Claudette Colvin also was pregnant and unmarried. And the black leaders of Montgomery decided that a woman with a vulgar tongue and who was bearing a child out of wedlock, was not the proper symbol around which to organize a movement for justice. And later, the same year, in the same city, on the same bus line, one Rosa Parks had the same problem.

Now when you say "Rosa Parks," no one says "Who was that?" But when you say "Claudette Colvin" nobody knows who she was. What was the difference between Rosa Parks and Claudette Colvin?

Rosa Parks went to work every day. Rosa Parks was the loving wife of brother Parks. Rosa Parks went to church every week. Rosa Parks was the secretary of the NAACP. Rosa Parks represented the kind of moral character around which a community of conscience could gather. Not simply because she had rights, but because she was right. And so I then understood my grandmother's tears. Those tears on April 4, 1968 began for me a quest to know how it was that these people, these sons and daughters of slaves, these people who had been brought from the south to north by their owners and made domestic workers, how it was these people had such a deep abiding faith, and had almost a legalistic commitment to morality, but at the same time in their hearts had a great concern for justice. Through the tears of my grandmother and the symbol of Rosa Parks, God developed a window through which I could see this dual quest among black Americans for moral excellence and social justice. That moral excellence, moral strength, and moral principles have been the foundation of black life in America is irrefutable. Moral strength has always been seen in the black community as divine responsibility. Henry Mitchell, an expert on black preaching, wrote a book called *Soul Theology*. And this book, *Soul Theology*, is not to be confused with liberation theology or black theology.

Theistic World View. Soul theology asserts that African culture created fertile ground among African slaves for Christian beliefs; that the African world view was such that when Africans came to America there was enough in Christianity that coincided with that world view that we readily adopted the Christian faith.

And one of those cultural values was that Africans had a theistic world view. So, to talk about a God beyond what we can see was compatible with African notions of reality. Life beyond death, and the concept of divinity permeated the psyche of African slaves. And that reality, then, suggested that Africans, and then African Americans, had this psyche that God is real and that God has expectations.

And so when we look at the church, the sociological perspective of our religious experience is that because blacks were oppressed and rejected and denied access to the greater society, the black church became, in the words of E. Franklin Frazier, "a kind of sur-

rogate world.” And that is true. The black church became the nation within a nation, a culture within a culture.

The black church, to the extent that humans need one, provided a kind of communal eros. That there was a loving community within a hostile world.

Staying in Touch With God. The church also was the connection through which people made contact with God. To suggest that the black church has always been simply a protest meeting, a political party, or a cultural phenomenon is to misread history. And it is a shallow analysis. People were attempting to stay in touch with God. And that contact had political implications: It’s hard to believe that you can talk to God, and then assume that you are only three-fifths a human. It’s hard to believe that you can speak to the Shaper of the heavens and the earth and believe, then, that you are inferior to other people who have the same access. Thus, African Americans viewed moral strength within the context of a theistic world view. And that world view became personified in the affirmation of the biblical view of humanity. For example, Genesis 1:26 says that God speaking to the Trinity said, “Let us make man in our own image.” And black folk believed that. That to the extent that there is a God, each of us, in spite of our color, had a little bit of that God in us. That came from the Bible.

Psalms 8:2 said that God had a pecking order in terms of what he created. And it said that God created people a little lower than angels. Unless anybody has met an angel, every other human is equal.

The biblical view of humanity extended from the Old Testament tradition to the New Testament tradition when Galatians 3:28 said that, “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free.” And so while Europeans were trying to figure out if the Bible was truly the word of God, Africans were affirming themselves on southern plantations saying, “We are somebody because we are God’s children.”

And the social dimension of that had serious implications because we assumed that since God considered all people equal, we should not be treated otherwise. Our social protests, our slave rebellions, and our desire to be free, therefore, had their roots and their foundations in our understanding of God’s will.

Personal Responsibility. But the African American understanding of God’s will did not simply have social implications. It also had implications for our own understanding of and commitment to personal responsibility. For God is right when God says, “Moses go down and tell Pharaoh to let my people go.” And God is also right when God tells Moses to tell the people, “Y’all let Pharaoh go too.” Of course, the challenge for Israel was to get out of Egypt. But then the secondary challenge, which took forty years, was to get Egypt out of them.

The challenge was a political challenge. But it was a political challenge with a spiritual and moral goal. Egypt wasn’t automatically bad. Egypt was bad because it violated God’s purpose and plan for Israel.

And when black Americans picked up on that paradigm, they understood that, on the one hand, they had the responsibility to rise above the shackles of slavery, that was Egypt. But on the other hand, we needed to expunge the degenerate ways of Egypt from our hearts. That was sin.

And, therefore, the black-church experience became one of strict fundamentalism, strict biblicalism, and strict adherence to moral principles based on our understanding that there is

a God, and God has a will which says a part of that will is thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt keep the Ten Commandments.

Thus moral strength and moral principles and mandates emerged from our sense of theism and our understanding of God.

Moral strength was also a strategy to achieve personal and social freedom.

Before I left home, as a child, my mother would always insist that I wore the right underwear. I could never figure out my mother's preoccupation with underwear and socks. And though I didn't have the right to question much, I said, "Well, Mother, what is it about this underwear thing? Why is that your concern that my underwear have no holes, my socks have no holes?" And then she would even confuse me more and say, "Well, if you ever have an accident, and they take you to the hospital, when they undress you they won't see any holes in your underwear." And my question of course, was why, if I had an accident, would my mother's concern be what others thought about my underwear.

Deserving Justice. But my mother's concern flowed from a tradition that said what the larger society thinks about you is important. In this way, moral strength and moral character in the history of the black experience have always been understood to be a strategy. Because to the extent that we were morally strong, to the extent that we were not corruptible, to the extent that we were clean on the inside and the outside, to the extent that our credentials were impeccable both educationally, intellectually and spiritually, we could demand justice because we would deserve it.

The whole sense of morality is right at the core of the freedom movement and the civil rights movement. Because to the extent that Rosa Parks was a fine woman, to the extent that she was a credible woman, to the extent that she was a faithful woman, to the extent that she was a hard-working woman, to the extent that she was a civic-minded woman, then and only then, could the discrimination in Montgomery be attacked based upon her incident.

Moral strength was a strategy from the Frederick Douglasses of this world to the Harriet Tubmans of this world, to the Martin Luther Kings of this world. Their message was, "We must defy these rumors where people say we are uncivilized. We must defy these rumors, we must be living testimonies that what folks say about us is wrong." That is the tradition of black America.

This is what our churches preached and taught, even before the revivalist movement. The revivalist movement of the 19th Century gave us some reenforcement from our white brothers. But even before the revival movement churches preached against drunkenness and gambling and prostitution and dancing and swearing and illegitimate births. Black churches stood for that, and when folks strayed, they were embarrassed. They were never glorified for wayward behavior.

Normative Values. If a person was walking down the street drunk and swearing, his whole family would be embarrassed. If a child got pregnant out of wedlock, they would send that child somewhere where folk didn't know her until she came back. The virtues that were preached were industry and thrift and patience, what we might call today the Protestant work ethic. This was normative in our community, preached in our churches from our pulpits in the 18th and 19th centuries.

If you don't believe me, Bishop J.W. Hood, the great AME Zion bishop, gave a speech in 1896 to the general convention of the AME Zion church. Here's what he said, "The race,

our race, has been charged with ignorance, immorality, indifference, and disregard for the marriage vows. We deny the false and slanderous accusations against the virtue of our women, the manhood of our men, and we speak from personal knowledge of the moral and social condition of the people. And we affirm that the ideals of the leaders of our people are as high as the ideal of life of their neighbors. And their practical life is more in harmony with the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, the life of the Man of Sorrows and the humble Nazarene than those bearing false witness against their neighbors without any personal knowledge of the charges alleged.”

Climate of Expectations. Bishop Hood described black America as having higher moral standards than even those who described us as being uncivilized. Bishop Hood affirmed the priority placed on personal morality. And so Dr. Hood and ministers like him in the 19th century, set the stage for people like Rosa Parks in the 20th century so that there was a climate of expectations. There was a common understanding that we must reserve the right to inspect the personal integrity of the victim before we cry justice, even to the oppressors.

Even Dr. King, at the march on Washington – in those sections that received the least attention – said, “I have a dream that one day my four little children will live in a country where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, *but by the content of their character.*” Which means that even King, in his most famous speech, in one of his most famous lines, held in balance rather than in tension, the need to have a right to just and fair society and the responsibility of moral character.

As I travel around the country speaking to young people, the question that I raise is this. If you don’t want to be judged by the color of your skin, what is the content of your character? For some people, when they sell drugs to little children, when they ride by and shoot other people on the street, when they rape women in Central Park, they would be better off judged by the color of their skin because they have no character.

Throughout history, black preachers never used slavery as an excuse to justify negative behavior. You can’t find one sermon where a black preacher in the 18th or 19th century said, “Well, I know you folks have been slaves, so drink all you want. I know that it’s been tough. It was hard coming over on the slave ship, so make as many babies as you want.” You will never find one black leader justifying immoral behavior, anti-social behavior, self-destructive behavior by using slavery as a rationale. And they were on the back steps of slavery. Whereas now, 200 years after slavery, we are now reverting back and using slavery as an excuse for the behavior of some people today.

Principles from the Founding. It’s quite interesting that when slavery was still legal, the slaves did not use slavery as an excuse to be non-productive. And so this conservative propensity of the black leadership in the 18th and 19th centuries caused them to adhere to the Bible in a literal way. It caused them to take the Constitution seriously when they heard that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. Even at the pitch fever of protest they would invoke those words to justify their claim.

Black leaders did not ever invoke the words of a Russian revolution. They never invoked the words of any other movement other than a movement that was Afro-centric, but based on the principles that had been laid at the founding of this nation.

