
Montgomery

*“Just to See Empty Bus, after Empty Bus
Go By . . .”*

The bus boycott (1955–1956) was not the first time that black residents boycotted public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama. Longtime black residents remembered that in August of 1900 (four years after the landmark ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* made “separate but equal” the law of the land) blacks organized a two-year boycott of segregated seating on city streetcars. “In response many of the city’s African-American ministers urged their congregations to walk instead of ride. The protest forced the streetcar firm to suspend segregation, though Jim Crow seating resumed after the boycott died down.”¹ Not only is this evidence that blacks in Montgomery, under the encouragement of their ministers, had boycott experience, it is also evidence that even before the bus boycott fifty-five years later,

1. Stewart Burns, *To the Mountaintop: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Sacred Mission to Save America 1955–1968* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 460 n. 37.

they proved that they could in fact pull together in common cause. Black Montgomery residents were not simply a passive community that did not, at times, resist manifestations of racial segregation. When the bus boycott got under way, there were older black residents who knew something about the importance of sticking together in a common cause, and these very likely made important contributions in this regard during the more than yearlong protest.

Beginning with the bus boycott in Montgomery, and throughout his civil rights ministry, Martin Luther King Jr. was always quick to say that long before he arrived on the scene, human, divine, and cosmic forces had been at work preparing the stage for the protest movement he was chosen to lead. In this regard, King made it clear that even had he not come to Montgomery, the movement that was born there would have occurred anyway. He was under no illusion about being the cause of that movement, or even its most important leader. He did not, in this regard, have what he referred to as a “Messiah complex.” Rather, he always knew that there was a need for many leaders to do the work of the movement.² In any event, the forces of history and the growing restlessness of blacks toward racial segregation and racism were such that the Montgomery struggle was nothing less than an idea whose time had come. None understood this better than Martin Luther King.

And yet, there is at least a grain of truth in James Farmer’s observation that while it is true that many people and events were evolving and seeming to come together prior to the bus boycott, they congealed around none other than Martin Luther King. However, it seems to me that Farmer goes too far when he suggests that the emerging movement could *only* have formed itself around King. “It had to be the Montgomery bus boycott which had the charisma

2. Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5:477.

to capture the imagination of people,” said Farmer. “Other things happened that didn’t capture the imagination of the nation. But King did.”³ True. But we humans can never know with certainty what God’s plans are, and whether there is only one person who can carry them out. Farmer was right about much of what he said, but only in hindsight. No one could have known ahead of time of King’s impact upon the stage of history. The signs were many that things were coming to a head in race relations in the South generally, and Montgomery, Alabama, in particular. In this sense, it is reasonable to say that a movement would have happened even if King had not been born, or arrived on the scene. I am always hesitant to say that if this or that person is not on the scene, God’s will that justice be done will somehow be thwarted. The combination of outstanding qualities that were Martin Luther King’s, were his alone, but this does not mean that God’s will for Montgomery would not have been achieved had he not been present, or answered the call. King knew this better than most. And yet, the fact of the matter is that he was indeed present at that particular moment in the history of the United States of America, and he did not hesitate to answer the call.

Disregard for Black Personhood

Martin Luther King knew from personal experience and the experiences of numerous blacks, how demeaning segregation was to his people. He was surely aware of brutal acts of violence to which blacks had been subjected both before and after he arrived in Montgomery. Although the horrific lynching of Claude Neal occurred in 1934 when King was a five-year-old, it was the first of two such incidents that left an indelible mark on the minds and

3. Fred Powledge, *Free at Last?: The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 82.

memories of blacks all over the country, but particularly in the South. Neal was brutally tortured and lynched in the north Florida town of Marianna, not far from the Alabama and Georgia state lines. Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff describe in gory detail the gruesome, torturous violation of black humanity.

Neal, who was accused of having killed a white woman, was scalded repeatedly with a hot iron, castrated, and dragged through the streets before being stretched and displayed in a tree. This had not been an impulse lynching; newspaper and radio stories had given advance notice of it. As Neal was being hauled by a mob from an Alabama jail to Marianna, a crowd estimated at about four thousand had time to get to the scene. By some accounts, he was forced to eat his own genitals, and his finger [*sic*] and toes were put on display in the town. It was a story that haunted the Negroes of north and central Florida for decades.⁴

It is difficult to imagine that Martin Luther King and most black southerners of his generation were not made aware of this horrific crime against black humanity in particular, humanity in general, and the God of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus Christ.

Even if King was not aware of this particular heinous crime from childhood until young adulthood when he assumed pastoral responsibilities at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery on September 1, 1954, an incident that was in some ways just as horrific occurred one year later in the Mississippi Delta on August 28, 1955 (eight years to the day before the March on Washington for Jobs and Employment). Fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis Till, a native of Chicago, was visiting a great uncle in Money, Mississippi when he allegedly made sexually implicit comments to a white woman named Carolyn Bryant. When Bryant's husband Roy, and his half-brother J. W. Milam, heard about the accusation they went

4. Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 95.

under the cover of darkness to the home of Till's great uncle Mose Wright, forcibly removed the young boy, drove him some distance away, tortured him to the point that his face was not recognizable, shot him behind the right ear, barbed-wired a seventy-five pound cotton gin fan to his neck, and rolled his body into the Tallahatchie River where, three days later, his body was seen several miles downriver by some boys fishing. Although an indictment of Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam was issued quickly, and Mose Wright heroically and bravely testified that they were the ones who removed his nephew from his home at gunpoint, the two men were found not guilty by a jury of twelve white men after "deliberating" and drinking soda for sixty-seven minutes.⁵

We can be certain that Martin Luther King was devastated by the brutal murder of young Emmett Till by men who claimed to be Christians. He frequently referred to that tragedy and the culprits. In September 1955, not long after the jury issued the not guilty verdict, King said: "The white men who lynch Negroes worship Christ. That jury in Mississippi, which a few days ago in the Emmett Till case, freed two white men from what might be considered one of the most brutal and inhuman crimes of the twentieth century, worships Christ."⁶ In February 1956 he said: "We have looked to Mississippi [*sic*] and seen supposedly Christian and civilized men brutally murdering the precious life of a little child."⁷ In April 1957, King queried God: "Why is it simply because some of your children ask to be treated as first-class human beings they are *trampled* over, their homes are bombed, their *children* are pushed from their classrooms, and sometimes little children are thrown in the deep waters of Mississippi?"

5. See Dan Wakefield, "An Hour and Seven Minutes: Justice, in Sumner," in *Reporting Civil Rights: Part One, American Journalism 1941-1963* (New York: Library of America, 2003), 217-21.

6. *The Papers* (2007), 6:232.

7. *Ibid.*, 6:253.

Why is it, oh God, that that has to happen?”⁸ King believed that although young Till was not of voting age, his brutal murder was meant to terrorize local blacks in the Mississippi Delta and throughout the South as a means to keeping them from the polls.⁹ In *Stride Toward Freedom*, King wrote of being skeptical that the white men accused of bombing his house would be prosecuted and found guilty. He wrote of the freshness of the Emmett Till case in their memories and concluded that, consequently, they had little reason to hope for a conviction.¹⁰ All of this shows that King was deeply affected by the brutal racial murder of the child, Emmett Till.

Such blatant violence and total disregard for black personhood and dignity was most assuredly one of the key factors pushing blacks in Montgomery, and other places in the Deep South, to mount forces of resistance. Segregation ordinances and the day in and day out disrespect to which they were subjected by white bus drivers and police officers served only to fuel the fires of discontent growing within blacks. They had been pushed to the brink of no return. L. D. Reddick put it all in perspective in 1956.

There had been a long history of abuse by the bus operators. Almost everybody could tell of some unfortunate personal experience that he himself had had or seen. Montgomery Negroes were fed up with the bus service in particular and, like Negroes throughout the South, with race relations in general. The outrage over the Emmett Till murder was alive in everybody’s mind. The silence and inaction of the Federal Government, in the face of the daily abuse, beatings and killings of Negro citizens, was maddening. Negroes have no faith at all in Southern law-making and law-enforcing agencies, for these instruments of “justice” are in the hands of “the brothers of the hoodlums who attack us.”

8. *Ibid.*, 6:289.

9. *Ibid.* (2000), 4:369.

10. Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 179–80.

Negroes themselves wanted to get into action. Here and elsewhere they were willing to fight it out—if the fighting was “fair.” . . . To remain human, the Negroes simply could not stand by and do nothing.¹¹

Although King might not have known it, by the time he arrived in Montgomery, black residents were already poised to protest the injustices that many had borne passively for so long.

King’s Ministerial Plan

When Martin Luther King was appointed senior minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, he was in the process of writing his doctoral dissertation, and was able to negotiate for reduced responsibilities that would allow him to complete that final requirement for the Ph.D. His plan for the first couple of years of his ministry included the completion and defense of the dissertation and receipt of his degree from Boston University the following year. While writing the dissertation, his intention was to effectively manage his pastoral duties as best he could, while also getting to know the members of the Dexter congregation. After receiving his degree he turned to those duties with an abandon, for he thought of himself first and foremost as a pastor, even though he also had aspirations to teach in a university or seminary setting someday. But this was a long-term objective, and he had no idea at the time as to what ministerial practice would bring.

King’s aim was to get the ministry at Dexter on a solid footing, while also familiarizing himself with the city and its leaders in all areas. He told a ministerial colleague, Ralph Abernathy, pastor of

11. L. D. Reddick, “The Bus Boycott in Montgomery,” in *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1989), 72. Originally published in *Dissent* 3 (Spring 1956): 107–17.

First Baptist Church in Montgomery, that this would likely take a few years. Consequently, he had no thoughts of leading a mass movement of any kind, and did not move too quickly to involve himself in too many nonchurch and community activities that might overcommit him to the point of detracting attention and energy from ministerial responsibilities at Dexter. He really wanted to focus his energy, attention, and talents on the church and its internal and outreach ministries. Toward this end he worked closely with the organizations and committees at Dexter, no doubt remembering the example of his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. In addition, he was mindful of Abernathy's advice that he should make work with the church's committees a priority. Moreover, because of King's own interest in religion, its relevance and its application to social problems, he made a couple of moves toward creating and reviving internal ministries that clearly indicated his desire for the church to be involved in social and political activity. He established the Social and Political Action Committee (SPAC) that had the twofold responsibility of keeping before the congregation the importance of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and maintaining membership in it, as well as holding forums to discuss and address social problems that were adversely affecting blacks in Montgomery. This was also a good way of keeping the new pastor informed about major social issues affecting blacks in the city. The members of the SPAC already had a longstanding interest in and commitment to addressing and solving social problems. Some of the members, including Alabama State College English professors Mary Fair Burks and JoAnn Robinson, chair and co-chair, respectively, were also members of the well-organized Women's Political Council (WPC). Burks organized the WPC in 1946 and served as its founding president.¹² JoAnn Robinson joined in 1950. Houston Roberson contends that Robinson

succeeded Jewel Lewis as president in 1952, making her the organization's third president.¹³ Having been disrespected and threatened by a Montgomery city bus driver when she was planning to visit relatives in Cleveland, Ohio during the Christmas holiday (not long after her arrival in Montgomery), Robinson remembered how utterly embarrassed she was over how she was treated, and vowed to not forget the incident. Moreover, she promised to make the city bus situation relative to her people a priority of the WPC.¹⁴

Burks and Robinson were not only leaders in the WPC, but as members of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and also co-chairs of the SPAC, they kept their new pastor informed about bus and related incidents of segregation and racism throughout the city. In addition, King himself was a member of the local chapter of the NAACP, yet another way that he was kept apprised of problems faced by blacks in the city.

King unwittingly prepared the Dexter congregation for social and political activism in yet another way. In this instance, he revived and revitalized the church's youth ministry. This was one of three or four ministries to which the young pastor gave early attention and energy. He and the church organized the Baptist Youth Fellowship (BYF) to meet the spiritual needs of members from six to thirty-five years of age. In one of its early symposia the BYF presented a program on "The Meaning of Integration for American Society." This symposium mirrored and supported the work of the Social and Political Action Committee. Roberson helpfully observes that the

12. Mary Fair Burks, "Trailblazers: Women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott," in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941-1965*, ed. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 75.

13. Houston Bryan Roberson, *Fighting the Good Fight: The Story of the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, 1865-1977* (New York/London: Routledge, 2005), 140.

14. JoAnn Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, ed. David J. Garrow. Sixth Printing (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 16-17. See also xiii-xiv.

significance of this is that we see early an effort on King's part toward "the preparation for the church's active participation in the civil rights movement."¹⁵ Another ministry that contributed significantly to this end was the revival of the spring lecture series. King believed this to be an excellent way to keep the members informed about major teachings and issues of the Christian faith, as well as the church's responsibility toward social issues. King invited Samuel DeWitt Proctor, an experienced pastor, as well as college professor, to inaugurate the newly revived lecture series. King's proposed topic for Proctor, "The Relevance of the New Testament to the Contemporary Situation," was consistent with his social gospel preaching at Dexter. King's hope was that the lecture series would encourage and energize the members "to become more aware and involved in the politics of their community, and to see a nexus between religion and civil life."¹⁶

We can see, then, that it was never the case that Martin Luther King did not want to be involved in directly addressing matters of race and other problems adversely affecting his people. As a young boy, in fact, he vowed to help his father to fight and eradicate such problems; to help him to fight racism.¹⁷ In addition, influenced by his father's social gospel ministry and preaching, as well as the stories he heard about his maternal grandfather's social gospel ministry, as a first-term seminary student at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, King unequivocally and proudly announced in one of his first formal academic papers that he was a staunch advocator of the social gospel.¹⁸ This was a significant claim, because an earlier generation of King scholars linked his social gospel leanings

15. Roberson, *Fighting the Good Fight*, 136.

16. *Ibid.*, 137.

17. Martin Luther King Sr., *Daddy King: An Autobiography* with Clayton Riley (New York: William Morrow, 1980), 109.

18. *The Papers*, 6:72.

too closely to his studies at the predominantly white Crozer, implying that it was there that King developed an affinity for social gospel ministry through his study of Walter Rauschenbusch's classic work, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), and the encouragement of his white seminary professors. As scholars on King began gaining access to his unpublished papers, and as Professor Clayborne Carson, Director of the King Papers Project and his staff at Stanford University, began editing and publishing King's papers in what is hoped will be a minimum of fourteen large volumes, we now know with certainty that King was already a strong advocate of social gospel ministry when he arrived on the Crozer campus. This corrected the earlier view that while he had a strong social conscience when he arrived at Crozer, he only became formally committed to the social gospel once his white seminary professors introduced him to the work of Rauschenbusch. By King's own admission, his study of Rauschenbusch did indeed provide for him a formal theological foundation for his commitment to the social gospel and his early decision in seminary to devote his ministry to focusing on a trilogy of social problems: racism, economic injustice, and militarism.¹⁹ Each of these issues was always on King's mind, even when his immediate focus was on one or the other of those issues. Increasingly, King had a strong sense that these three social problems were inextricably connected. Not only was King inspired and influenced by the social gospel ministries of his father and grandfather, but that of other southern black pastors, as well as the commitment to the social gospel that he saw in some of his professors and mentors at Morehouse College, including President Benjamin E. Mays and professors George Kelsey and Samuel Williams who taught him Bible and philosophy, respectively.

19. See *ibid.*, 6:88, 126, 327.

Notwithstanding his commitment to social gospel ministry and activism, young King's decision as a new senior pastor to devote most of his time to focusing on internal ministerial responsibilities at Dexter for the first few years was quite reasonable. And yet, he seemed to be aware that other (unseen) forces—cosmic and divine—were at work in history and Montgomery that could trump his timetable and his best-laid plans. King could see God's Spirit working in pre-bus boycott Montgomery, and there is no indication that he desired to interfere with this in any way. He had no sense of what his responsibility or role would be in this, but he was vigilant in performing his ministerial duties and slowly familiarizing himself with the problems making the lives of black residents of Montgomery miserable.

Bus Incidents before the Boycott

Without question, Martin Luther King knew that Rosa Parks was not the first black woman to be arrested for not giving her bus seat to a white person. Historian Stephen B. Oates erred, therefore, when he wrote in his otherwise excellent and widely acclaimed biography of King (*Let the Trumpet Sound*, 1982) that Rosa Parks was in fact the first to be arrested.²⁰ It is known that even before the Parks bus incident King was very much aware of similar cases involving two young people, fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin and seventeen-year-old Mary Louise Smith. Ironically, these two bus episodes occurred in March and October of the same year of the

20. See Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 65. This was the most definitive biography of King to this point. To a large extent this was because it was the first biography that depended more extensively on unpublished papers by King as well as FBI and State Department files that had previously been unavailable to researchers and scholars. And of course, it didn't hurt that Oates was a talented and skillful writer-historian.

Rosa Parks arrest for a similar violation. Moreover, this is not to say that similar incidents had not occurred even before those of Colvin, Smith, and Parks. For example, in 1949 a number of other black women, including but not limited to Geneva Johnson, Viola White, and Katie Wingfield, were also arrested for refusing to give their seat to a white patron. In addition, David J. Garrow has written: “Earlier in 1949, two young children, visiting from the north and unfamiliar with Montgomery’s practice of reserving the first ten seats on each bus for white riders only, even if black passengers were forced to stand over vacant seats, also were hauled in for refusing a driver’s command to surrender their seats.”²¹

Martin Luther King was, in fact, a member of the ad hoc committee that met with the police commissioner and bus officials regarding the Colvin incident. In his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958), he recalled that the black community was in such an uproar about the violent treatment of Colvin by the arresting officers that there was talk even then of a boycott.²² A tentative agreement was reached in that meeting that required bus drivers to be courteous to black patrons and to obey the segregation ordinance of the state of Alabama and the city of Montgomery that required that seats be filled by blacks from the rear of the bus and by whites from the front. Not entirely unexpected, the bus company attorney rejected the proposed agreement, which most likely would have been violated by bus drivers anyway. However, King observed that although the bus company and city officials once again failed the black community, something of momentous proportion had begun happening among blacks in Montgomery. He reflected on this, saying: “The long repressed feelings of resentment

21. David J. Garrow, “The Origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott,” in *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956*, ed. David J. Garrow (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1989), 608.

22. King, *Stride*, 41.

on the part of the Negroes had begun to stir. The fear and apathy which had for so long cast a shadow on the life of the Negro community were gradually fading before a new spirit of courage and self-respect.”²³ On the horizon for blacks in Montgomery was the emergence of a new sense of dignity; a new sense of somebodyness, as King called it. This not only affected black adults, but black students of all ages as well. In his memoir, James Forman acknowledged the effect that the Montgomery struggle had on blacks of all ages, but especially young blacks.

The Montgomery bus boycott had a very significant effect on the consciousness of black people throughout the United States. In 1956 our people constantly said, “Well, black folks just can’t stick together. We can never act as a unit, we can’t unify to protest against this man. We’re like a bunch of crabs—the minute one of us crawls through the top, the rest of us drag him back down.” This idea had been instilled by the colonizing force of white society, which always played down the importance of the black man. . . .

. . . The boycott had a particularly important effect on young blacks and helped to generate the student movement of 1960. I remember Ruby Doris Robinson, who became executive secretary of SNCC, saying that when she was about thirteen or fourteen and saw those old people walking down there in Montgomery, just walking, walking, walking, it had a tremendous impact. The boycott woke me to the real—not merely theoretical—possibility of building a nonviolent mass movement of Southern black people to fight segregation. . . . In Montgomery, you could see the real thing.²⁴

Martin Luther King could see glimmers of black self-determination and a growing sense of pride and dignity even before December 1, 1955. Without question, then, King was aware of what was happening in Montgomery relative to racial incidents on city buses

23. *Ibid.*, 42.

24. James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries: A Personal Account* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 84–85.

and in other areas that directly affected the lives of blacks. He was also aware of what he described as a new sense of humanity and dignity emerging among black residents of Montgomery. Rev. Robert S. Graetz, a white pastor who was senior minister of the all-black Trinity Lutheran Church in Montgomery, also saw such a change take place not only in his parishioners, but in blacks across the city. For Graetz, this emergence of a new sense of dignity and worth was “the real victory” that blacks achieved during the bus boycott. “No court decision, no change in practices or regulations would have made any real difference in Montgomery, Alabama,” he wrote, “if the Negro people themselves had not changed. They needed to recognize their own value as human beings. Only then could they step forward and appropriate their own value as human beings. Only then could they step forward and appropriate the legal victory they had won.”²⁵ This change of attitude about themselves and their recognition and acknowledgment of their humanity and dignity was the real victory, according to Graetz.

Contributions of Black Youths to the Bus Boycott

What is interesting about the Claudette Colvin episode, but was not at all unique to her, is that she both refused to give up her seat, and physically resisted the police officers who sought to forcibly remove her from the bus. Her resistance went beyond mere words, although merely talking back to whites—regardless of age—in those days, or even refusing to do what they commanded, could have had severe consequences. Colvin went further, in that she did everything in her power, short of outright attacking the police officers, to keep from being removed from the bus. The police officers reportedly called

25. Robert S. Graetz, *Montgomery: A White Preacher's Memoir* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 107.

her a “black bitch” and a “black whore” as they literally dragged her from the bus. Colvin recalled that one of the police officers kicked her multiple times with his heavy boots.²⁶ It is also significant that, unlike others who were previously arrested for violating Montgomery’s segregation ordinance, Claudette Colvin actually “pled not guilty and through her attorney, Fred D. Gray,” she “challenged the segregation ordinances.”²⁷ Another very important, though frequently overlooked, point regarding Colvin’s resistance is that she was a black youth of Montgomery, which gave lie to any claim that what was happening in Montgomery and other places in the Deep South affected primarily or only black adults; or that it was only black adults who resisted and fought against racism and segregation. We will see momentarily that young Claudette Colvin’s resistance was not at all unlike the earlier intentional spilling of water on a restaurant counter by nine-year-old Gwendolyn Patton in 1952, which was also evidence that the same injustices and inhumane treatment experienced by black adults were experienced by black children and youths, and that they were just as aware and resentful of it as were adults. Moreover, it was evidence that black youths, without waiting for guidance, counsel, and approval from adults, also found ways to resist the injustices done to them. This was also evidence of a growing, deepening sense of their humanity and dignity.

Claudette Colvin was taught about the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights by her history teacher, Mrs. Geraldine Nesbitt, a black woman, who taught at the all-black Booker T. Washington High School.²⁸ Many of Washington High’s teachers

26. Ellen Levine, *Freedom’s Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1993), 24–25.

27. Horace Randall Williams and Ben Beard, *This Day in Civil Rights History* (Cincinnati: Emmis Books, 2005), 76.

28. Stewart Burns, *To the Mountaintop: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Sacred Mission to Save America 1955–1968* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 4.

were members of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where King was pastor. The lesson on the Constitution was quite likely still fresh in young Colvin's mind when she boarded a city bus—ironically in front of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church—for the return trip home after school on the day in question. Ordered by the bus driver to give her seat to a white patron, Colvin insisted throughout the ordeal that she had a constitutional right to her seat, “just as much as that [white] lady, she said.”²⁹

Colvin's resistance on the bus was also illustrative of the growing sense among black youths that they had a real stake in what was happening in their city, especially when they were being hurt and otherwise demeaned by the racist practices of whites. Therefore, even in Montgomery, many black youths figured out early that if they were old enough to recognize that they were being treated inhumanely and unjustly, they were old enough to resist such treatment and to take steps to overcome it. This was a lesson that Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff member James Bevel would later help Martin Luther King to appreciate (during the Birmingham campaign in 1963) much more than he had previously. Black children had a real stake in any organized efforts to resist racial discrimination. It is not that King did not understand this, and even acknowledge it. He did. Initially, however, he was hesitant to include massive numbers of black children and youths on the frontline of mass nonviolent demonstrations for fear that they would be harmed. However, we will see later (in chapter 3) that King came to see that violence was being done to black children and youths whether they were directly involved in the nonviolent demonstrations or not, and consequently, it made sense to allow them to march for their freedom and dignity. In addition, there is no doubt that in later

29. Levine, *Freedom's Children*, 24.

civil rights campaigns King remembered the contributions made by Montgomery youths such as Claudette Colvin.

The history teacher who taught Claudette Colvin and her classmates about the Constitution and about their Afrikan heritage made such a lasting impression on Colvin that she developed almost overnight a new sense of pride and dignity. She changed her entire outlook, including her appearance. At a time when blacks used hot combs and curlers and spent huge amounts of money on chemicals to straighten their hair, Colvin decided that she would no longer resort to this, but would wear her hair in its natural form. She would no longer be ashamed of her kinky hair, wide nose, thick lips, and other Afrikan features. Unknown to the young teen at the time, her ideas and actions actually anticipated the Black Consciousness Movement of the late 1960s and the declaration of many blacks that “black is beautiful.” Colvin said that her teacher “really had pricked my mind, so I went home and I washed my hair and I didn’t straighten it.”³⁰ Some of her peers thought their classmate’s new look to be a bit comical, but Colvin paid them no mind, preferring to listen to and react to the rhythm of her own conscience.

Looking back on the Montgomery experience after forty years, Colvin told Ellen Levine that she had grown up in that city and that her parents taught her about racial ethics and the racial divide that existed between whites and blacks. Essentially she was told by her parents and other adult blacks, that black people had their place and whites had theirs. Blacks were in every sense considered the subordinates of whites. Even as a child, however, Colvin knew that whites were the inventors of this line of reasoning. Her first memory of being angry about racism and segregation was when she was about nine years old and wanted to go to the rodeo with her sister. Like so many Deep South black parents, her father had the difficult

30. *Ibid.*, 21.

task of telling his child that only white kids could attend the rodeo. Not unlike the boy King when his parents tried—unsuccessfully—to explain to him why the white parents of his boyhood friend refused to allow the two to play together, it is hard to imagine that Colvin's father had better luck. The closest that Colvin and her sister got to the rodeo, she reflected, was the cowboy hats that their father bought for them.

Claudette Colvin recalled being permitted to buy things at the downtown department stores, but not being allowed to buy and eat food at the lunch counter. Blacks could purchase items, but were not allowed to sit down to eat at the store lunch counter. They could spend their money anywhere in the store, including at the lunch counter, but they were not permitted the decency to sit down comfortably at the lunch counter and eat the food their money purchased. This realization angered and unsettled Colvin and other black youths in Montgomery. As if this was not enough, another dehumanizing practice was that some stores would not allow blacks to try on clothing before they purchased them. Essentially they had to already know their size, or had to guess at it. It is not hard to imagine that blacks frequently had to make multiple trips to a store just to purchase a single item of clothing. Since they were not allowed to try on clothing in the store, they would have to return the item once they got home and discovered that it was too large or too small. Or perhaps they simply did not like the way the item looked on their body. Although Colvin and other black youths rebelled against such practices, adult blacks told them that this was just the way it was, and nothing could be done about it, a response that many black youths found to be entirely unacceptable.

As a young high school student during the Montgomery bus boycott, Claudette Colvin was angry about what she saw and experienced every day of her young life. Other black youths across

the city were just as aware and outraged. Not surprisingly, Colvin and her friends talked with each other about their experiences, essentially sharing notes and commiserating with each other. The sharing was also cathartic and provided support for their increasing sense of discontentment. It was also a way of reminding them that they were not alone; that other black youths were also increasingly disenchanted about such discriminatory practices. In addition, mutually sharing their experiences of racial discrimination served to enhance their sense of camaraderie, as well as their sense that they did not have to continue to passively accept such treatment. Moreover, younger Montgomery blacks concluded that “the older [black] people let white people get away with it. They never said they didn’t like it,” Colvin lamented. “Older black people were always respectful to white people. But the younger blacks began to rebel.”³¹

Older blacks’ failure to protest discriminatory treatment by racist whites was a major disappointment to younger blacks. Moreover, Colvin recalled that black youths at Washington High School were angered the most when a classmate, Jeremiah Reeves, was accused of assaulting and raping a white woman. Reeves emphatically and persistently denied even having consensual sex with the woman. White authorities kept Reeves in jail until he came of legal age, and then executed him on March 28, 1958. About one week later, after worship service on Easter Sunday, April 6, 1958, Martin Luther King led fifteen black ministers on a protest march to the state capitol, where he addressed approximately two thousand people in protest of the electrocution of Reeves, and “the severity and inequality of the penalty that constitutes the injustice. Full grown white men committing comparable crimes against Negro girls are rare [*sic*] ever punished, and are never given the death penalty or even a life

31. *Ibid.*, 20.

sentence,” King told the crowd.³² Shamefully, yet consistent with white church reactions to the boycott and virtually any organized efforts on the part of blacks to resist racial discrimination, about three hundred white ministers and church leaders in Montgomery published a statement of condemnation of the Easter Sunday protest “and recommending that such mass meetings, ‘with exaggerated emphasis on wrongs and grievances’ be replaced ‘by conversations among responsible leaders of both races.’”³³ Although King, Ralph Abernathy, and Robert Graetz issued a public reply “accepting the ministers’ invitation to dialogue and requesting that they propose a date and place for such a discussion,” there was no reply, and thus no meeting occurred.³⁴ King was clear that miscarriages of justice such as that suffered by young Reeves and countless numbers of blacks was not a political issue, but fundamentally a moral issue, “a question of the dignity of man.”³⁵

The NAACP hired lawyers to defend Reeves. This was around the time that Claudette Colvin first heard of that organization. She recalled that she and her peers at the high school decided to show movies and take donations to help pay for good legal counsel for Reeves. Colvin observed that the “rebellion and anger” of black youths in Montgomery was very much connected to what was seen as the wrongful accusation, arrest, prosecution, and execution of Reeves.

Young Jeremiah Reeves had already been accused, arrested, and put on death row just prior to Martin Luther King’s arrival in Montgomery. King soon heard about this travesty of justice, and wrote about the case in *Stride Toward Freedom*.

32. *The Papers* (2000), 4:397.

33. *Ibid.*, 4:397 n. 2.

34. *Ibid.*, 4:398.

35. *Ibid.*, 4:397.

Reeves, a drummer in a Negro band, had been arrested at the age of sixteen, accused of raping a white woman. One of the authorities had led him to the death chamber, threatening that if he did not confess at once he would burn later. His confession, extracted under this duress, was later retracted, and for the remaining seven years that his case and his life, dragged on, he continued to deny not only the charge of rape but the accusation of having had sexual relations at all with his white accuser.³⁶

During King's tenure as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the organization made sizable financial contributions to the death penalty cases of Reeves, as well as Drewey Aron.³⁷ King saw that these cases were most typical when it came to blacks' experience in the criminal justice system in Montgomery and the rest of the state. For example, during the years that Reeves sat in prison, a number of white men in Alabama were accused of rape, but their accusers were young black women. Not only were these men seldom arrested, they were quickly released by an all-white Grand Jury (even when arrested), and thus were never brought to trial. "For good reason," King said, "the Negroes of the South had learned to fear and mistrust the white man's justice."³⁸ Blacks knew that more often than not, neither policemen nor court officials (generally nonfederal court officials) were on their side; that they could not expect justice from them.

Claudette Colvin and other black youths were well aware of the Alabama state segregation ordinance and what this meant on the city buses that many of them rode to and from school every day. Signs on the buses pointed to "colored" and "white" sections. Black young people were as much affected by such practices as black adults, a fact that often seemed to elude many parents and other grownups. Black

36. King, *Stride*, 31.

37. *The Papers* (2005), 5:335.

38. King, *Stride*, 32.

youths witnessed what happened to Claudette Colvin in the bus incident, and were as angry and traumatized as she was in some ways. And yet Colvin, like many of her angry peers, really did not know how best to vent her anger, frustration, and disappointment. She and other black youths knew they were angry and knew the source of that anger. And yet, Colvin spoke for many when she said that they simply felt helpless and “just wanted change.”³⁹ We will see later that another way Colvin asserted herself in the face of the segregation ordinances was by agreeing to be one of the four plaintiffs in the case against Montgomery officials filed in the U.S. District Court.

Joseph Lacey was a thirteen-year-old Montgomery resident when the bus boycott began. In later years, he spoke of how excited he and other black youths were as they anticipated the first day of the boycott. They were even more excited while walking to school and were being passed by empty bus, after empty bus, after empty bus. “It was just a beautiful thing,” Lacey recalled. “It was a day to behold to see nobody on the bus.”⁴⁰ There was much camaraderie and togetherness among black youths and adults during the boycott, Lacey recalled. They all “walked and enjoyed walking,” because they were walking for their freedom and the freedom of those who would come after them. “Everybody felt like a part of the struggle because everybody had a part.”⁴¹ It is also significant that black youths were not of the view that *all* whites were guilty of intentional acts of racism and discrimination. This was really quite amazing in itself, inasmuch as there was good reason for blacks to draw the general conclusion that all whites were responsible for racial segregation. For the truth is that most blacks only witnessed exceptional instances when a white person behaved in a humane and respectful manner

39. Levine, *Freedom's Children*, 26.

40. *Ibid.*, 27.

41. *Ibid.*, 27.

toward them. While there were surely instances in which black parents, reacting to the racism they had experienced their entire lives, taught their children that all whites were guilty of racist behavior, most black parents did not do this. Instead, they taught their children that even though it might seem that all whites behaved toward blacks like members of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizen's Council, individual whites should be judged on the basis of how they actually behave toward blacks. Young Joseph Lacey believed that some whites, including white youths, even boycotted the buses as a sign of their sympathy with the cause.⁴²

Although most white youth in Montgomery were not involved in the boycott to the extent of their black peers, it is instructive to know that a few young whites likely stood with them, as Joseph Lacey implied. Some white youths, like some white adults, intentionally did not ride the buses during the boycott. This was likely their way of expressing support for the protest.⁴³ While most white youths did not volunteer to do work for the MIA as black students did—for example, many black female youths volunteered to work in the MIA office⁴⁴—it is known that at least one white female youth (who was from the North) did indeed volunteer to work there. However, because there were so many violent threats and outbursts from racist whites, black leaders advised her against it, saying that it would put her life too much at risk.⁴⁵ Although at this writing I have seen no evidence that significant numbers of whites actively sought to support the boycott, it is of no small moment that a few did. It is a reminder that no matter what era of history being discussed, God always has a witness, even in the group deemed to be the oppressor.

42. *Ibid.*, 27.

43. L. D. Reddick, *Crusader without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 76.

44. *Ibid.*, 128.

45. *Ibid.*, 128.

This, of course, says more about God than human beings as such. God has created human beings such that they possess an inherent sense of right and wrong, of what is just and unjust. The faithful and obedient ones will always protest wrong and injustice, regardless.

Black male youths also had active roles in the boycott. One such volunteer was Yancey Martin, a college freshman during the boycott. When Martin asked Ralph Abernathy, a family friend, what he could do to support the boycott, he was told that since drivers were needed, he could help to organize drivers to pick up boycotters near the bus stops and transport them to and from work. Martin told Howell Raines: "And so all the guys who were on my street . . . and a group of other folk whose parents had cars, we would all get up in the morning as early as we could. . . . And what we had to do was we had to know the names of everybody in there or else the police would stop and try to charge you with operating an illegal jitney service. And so what we would do is, by knowing everybody's name, we'd just say that these are my cousins or these are friends of mine I'm giving a lift."⁴⁶ Just here, it is of interest to note that the taxi service devised and managed by the MIA was applauded by a local white librarian and activist, Juliette Morgan. Morgan had written letters to the local newspaper supporting the boycott, for which she would pay a heavy price. In the matter of the MIA's transportation system, Morgan wrote a letter to the editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser* on December 12, 1955, a week after the boycott began. "Not since the first battle of the Marne has the taxi been put to as good a use as it has this last week in Montgomery," she wrote. "However, the spirit animating our Negro citizens as they ride these taxis or walk from the heart of Cloverdale to Mobile Road has been more like that of Gandhi than of the 'taxicab army' that saved Paris."⁴⁷

46. Quoted in Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), 58, 59.

Although it is not clear that a part of the formal strategy of the MIA was that of soliciting the volunteer assistance of black youths, there is no question that they provided assistance in a number of ways. Just as some Montgomery blacks recalled with delight how all class differences seemed to take a back seat in the mass prayer meetings, Yancey Martin marveled at how Montgomery blacks seemed to unify as one big family in support of the boycott. “I had never seen that happen in Montgomery,” he said, “and I must admit that I have never seen that happen *anywhere* among black people. . . . Even the people who were not in attendance at the meetings, who are just sorta like people who don’t get involved, decided to abide by the rules. . . .”⁴⁸ Martin Yancey witnessed and applauded the fact that black people in Montgomery were sticking together in a common cause.

In addition, a fact that often goes unnoticed is that the weekly mass prayer meetings (that started out as twice-a-week meetings) were actually open to all members of the Montgomery community. Boycott leaders placed no restriction on the race or ethnicity of participants. It is known that only a couple of whites, such as Rev. Robert S. Graetz, senior minister of the all-black Trinity Lutheran Church, and Rev. Thomas P. Thrasher, rector of a large Episcopal church in Montgomery, were openly sympathetic toward the bus boycott. Of these, Graetz regularly attended and contributed to the mass prayer meetings, and like a number of black ministers, his home was bombed. This was the price exacted for his commitment to the civil rights and freedom for blacks, and his unwillingness to be terrorized into silence and passivity. Graetz was in fact one of the more popular pastor-leaders involved in the boycott. In his memoir he wrote of how enthusiastically the massive crowds received him at

47. Quoted in Sanford Wexler, *An Eyewitness History of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Checkmark Books, 1999), 80.

48. Quoted in Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 59.

the prayer meetings whenever he was called upon to do something, for example, read scripture.⁴⁹ White media representatives attended the meetings, as well as a few whites whose purpose was merely to keep an eye on what blacks were doing. In addition, King and boycott leaders were aware that black spies also attended the mass prayer meetings and would report back to the white authorities. King said that the mayor's cook was a known spy who attended the meetings, and that police commissioner Clyde Sellars allowed three black prisoners to "attend the mass meetings so that they can tell him what has happened."⁵⁰ It might well be that some of the information that black spies reported to whites was in fact disinformation intended to throw white officials off track.

Sense of Terror among Black Parents

A number of instructive things happened during the bus boycott. For example, not all black youths who participated in the prayer meetings at local churches had the wholehearted support of their parents or guardians. Some had no support at all. Such parents demanded that their child not get involved. What was behind this? Surely it was not because they preferred the mistreatment and disrespect of blacks by white bus drivers to continue. Without question, they did want such practices to stop, but they feared for the safety of their children if they resisted the racist commands of bus drivers.

Many black parents had lived too long with segregation and racism in the Deep South and thus had vivid memories of terrorist acts committed against family members or other blacks by white racists who were often affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens Council, and other white hate groups. These individuals were

49. Graetz, *Montgomery: A White Preacher's Memoir*, 106.

50. *The Papers* (1997), 3:112.

frequently members of the local police department and/or officers of the court, including judges and district attorneys, which meant that blacks could count on no protection whatever from law enforcement officers and the courts. Often it was the case that blacks knew who the Klansmen and/or White Citizens Council members were who sought to terrorize them. They knew that these people were frequently churchgoers, affiliated with the police, officers of the court, or businessmen; so-called respectable members of white society. Because these were the very people that black residents had to depend on for justice, most blacks were not naïve enough to believe that justice was forthcoming. Black parents knew that their involvement in the mass prayer meetings and the bus boycott could cause them to lose their job if their white employer found out. This very thing happened to Georgia Gilmore, who lived near the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church parsonage. She was fired from her cafeteria job because of her involvement with the boycott. Undaunted, and refusing to bow down and passively submit to white racist pressure and threats, Gilmore went out and organized the “Club from Nowhere,” through which black women baked and sold pies, cakes, and other pastries to raise money to support the boycott. This proved to be a significant source of revenue for the MIA.

In addition to the fear of losing jobs, there was the fear among many black adults of losing their life, and even more terrifying, the fear of losing a child. It was the type of unsettling fear that was exhibited by Mississippian Anne Moody’s mother in 1955 when Moody, then fourteen, asked her if she had heard about the brutal murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi. The Moodys lived near where the abduction and brutal murder had taken place. In her book, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Moody wrote about her mother’s reaction to her question about the Till murder.

“Where did you hear that?” she said angrily.

“Boy, everybody really thinks I’m dumb or deaf or something. I heard Eddie them talking about it this evening coming from school.”

“Eddie them better watch how they go around here talking. These white folks git a hold of it they gonna be in trouble,” she said.

“What are they gonna be in trouble about, Mama? People got a right to talk, ain’t they?”

“You go on to work before you is late. And don’t you let on like you know nothing about that boy being killed before Miss Burke them [the white family for whom Moody did domestic work after school]. Just do your work like you don’t know nothing,” she said. “That boy’s a lot better off in heaven than he is here,” she continued, and then started singing again.⁵¹

Just as it did during the period of American enslavement of Afrikans, singing often helped blacks to bear their fears and uncertainties, as well as lift their hopes for freedom and justice. Notwithstanding this, Moody’s mother was clearly terrified out of her mind, not so much for herself as for her daughter. She therefore instructed her to pretend to know nothing, and to say nothing around white people about the murder of young Emmett Till. Moody was taught to lie and be untrue to herself in such matters when in the presence of whites. In order to escape racist violence in the Deep South, blacks frequently had to defy truth. How must it have affected their psyche when they were taught in church and school the virtue of truth-telling? Too many of them (and their parents) knew that speaking and telling the truth about certain things meant severe punishment, and too often, death.

Most black adults during that period in the Deep South lived in utter fear because of what they had either experienced firsthand, or

51. Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dell, 1976 [1968]), 123.

heard about regarding white violence against their people, for no other reason than they were black. Anne Moody reflected that before Emmett Till was murdered, she “had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now,” she added, “there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed just because I was black.”⁵² Imagine that; a child living her day-to-day life in literal fear of being killed just because she happened to be born with black skin.

What is significant about Anne Moody’s questioning of her mother is the clear evidence that black youths were not only aware of violent racist acts against blacks (as black adults were), but were as much affected by such awareness as their parents and other black adults. In addition, black youths were more apt to want to do something about it, as SCLC staff member James Bevel discovered when he did voter registration work in Jackson, Mississippi a few years after the boycott and two years before the Birmingham, Alabama campaign. Bevel had witnessed with his own eyes the willingness of black youths to take risks when black adults would not. From the Mississippi experience, Bevel knew that like young Anne Moody and her peers, Birmingham’s black youths were less likely to be appeased by adult blacks’ advice to pretend, when in the presence of whites, that they knew nothing about the violence and brutality being perpetrated against their people by whites.

Notwithstanding black parents’ concern for their job or the safety of their children, many black youths, such as Fred Taylor and other students at Montgomery’s Booker T. Washington High School, who wanted their teachers to discuss with them what was happening during the boycott would secretly attend the mass prayer meetings, against the instructions of their parents or guardians. Taylor lived with his grandmother who was terrified for his life, and would not give him permission to participate in the protest at any level,

52. *Ibid.*, 125.

including the mass prayer meetings. Nevertheless, in complete defiance, young Taylor would sneak away to the meetings and then lie about where he had been.

Like many Montgomery black youths, Taylor remembered the new sense of pride and dignity he felt when Martin Luther King declared at the mass prayer meetings that black people are *somebody*. This led to a changed self-image, as well as his outlook on his family. "It was right during the boycott that I began to have a different assessment of myself as an individual and to feel my sense of worth,"⁵³ Taylor reflected. At that particular time, King might not have known the precise impact he was having on black youths of Montgomery, but some of the young people did know, and like Taylor, did not hesitate to acknowledge it.

A New Sense of Dignity

When on December 20, 1956, U.S. Marshalls officially served the Supreme Court order that the city of Montgomery's and the state of Alabama's segregation ordinance was unconstitutional, Martin Luther King intended to ride the first desegregated bus in Montgomery early the next morning. King, E. D. Nixon, Ralph Abernathy, and Glenn Smiley all boarded the bus that ran in front of his house at 6:00 a.m. However, it appears that King and company might not have been the first to break the boycott. L. Alex Wilson, a black reporter of the *Tri-State Defender* in Memphis, and his photographer, Ernest Withers, were present when King announced the end of the boycott and thus knew that King would be trying to board a desegregated bus early the next morning. Gene Roberts

53. Levine, *Freedom's Children*, 29.

and Hank Klibanoff tell the story of what happened after King's announcement.

In his hotel room after the meeting, Alex Wilson was feeling too inspired and exhilarated to let the story pass by him routinely. He came up with a plan of his own. At four in the morning, he woke Withers up and told him to get dressed, Withers would later say. The two of them went out onto Montgomery's dark streets and waited for a bus. When the first one arrived, Withers began shooting pictures of Wilson boarding the bus, then took some more shots of Wilson sitting in the front of the bus. The driver, Withers recalled, was hiding his face.⁵⁴

According to this account, Wilson and Withers boarded a desegregated bus, even before King did.

In any case, Fred Taylor and other black youths followed the instructions of King and other MIA leaders on how to groom, dress, and behave when they returned to the buses. Before the boycott, they had to seat from the rear of the bus. When they returned to the buses they could sit wherever they wanted on a first-come first-serve basis. On the first day of desegregation, Taylor sat proudly behind the bus driver. He would sit next to a white man, he recalled, but was quite intentional about not sitting next to a white woman. For him, as for many other black youths, the fact that Jeremiah Reeves was still on death row for allegedly raping a white woman was still too fresh and painful in his mind. In addition, the image of the brutal murder of young Emmett Till was still etched indelibly into his and the memory and psyche of all southern blacks. This meant, in part, that even though the Supreme Court eventually outlawed the segregation ordinance in Montgomery and the state of Alabama, whites and blacks in Montgomery were far from being a real community, let alone the beloved community that was King's goal.

54. Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 142,

Princella Howard reflected on what it meant to be an eight-year-old in a household that was actually devoted to working with the MIA during the boycott. She and her six-year-old sister participated in the boycott and later became student leaders in the post-boycott movement in Montgomery in the 1960s. One of her fondest memories was how, during the boycott, the MIA succeeded in mobilizing and bringing together blacks of different social and economic classes and “who were generally at odds with each other.” People who did not otherwise worship or socialize together because of class differences had no difficulty participating together in the prayer meetings. Howard mused: “It was remarkable to see the rich blacks and the poor ones at mass meetings interested in the same thing.”⁵⁵ She viewed this as one of the seldom-mentioned victories among blacks in Montgomery; that blacks of all social classes were able to stand and fight together for a common cause. Montgomery blacks had proved conclusively that blacks could unite around a common cause and stick together until there was an acceptable resolution.

Martin Luther King certainly did not fail to notice the intermixing of the respective social and economic classes in the prayer meetings. After the Montgomery campaign, he often recalled how blacks in that city came together, organized, learned to get along in common cause, and learned to stick together, regardless of social and economic class.⁵⁶ This showed King not only the need for this very thing to happen in other black communities, but that it was in fact possible. He reasoned that if blacks could do it in Montgomery—and as we saw earlier, blacks had even done it in 1900 during the boycott of the public trolleys—they could do it anywhere else in the country. Generally, King applauded the emergence of the new sense of self,

55. Levine, *Freedom's Children*, 31.

56. King, *Stride*, 187, 190.

dignity, and destiny among Montgomery blacks. “The Montgomery Negro had acquired a new sense of somebodiness and self-respect,” he said, “and had a new determination to achieve freedom and human dignity no matter what the cost.”⁵⁷ In addition, and most significantly, King made positive observations about the youths of Montgomery, saying: “The children seem to display a new sense of belonging. The older children are aware of the conflict and the resulting tension, but they act as if they expect the future to include a better world to live in.”⁵⁸ This is significant because it means that already, in the first major campaign of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King was aware of its effect on black youths, even if he was not as aware of his and the movement’s effect on them; even if formal plans had not been made by boycott leaders as to how best to utilize black youth in the boycott. Nevertheless, a seed had been planted in his mind, and would take root and germinate to full bloom in the early weeks of the Birmingham, Alabama campaign, although we will see that when the time came he actually had to be prodded to permit the involvement of children and youths.

Martin Luther King was not the only one to observe and acknowledge the positive influence of the Montgomery struggle on black youths. Earlier in this chapter, we saw that James Forman reflected on the strong impact that the boycott had on the outlook of black youths in particular, and blacks generally. In addition, Robert Graetz made a similar observation while reflecting on how the bus boycott, even in its earlier stage, positively influenced black youths.

White people couldn’t understand the changes that had taken place. Again and again I had heard the refrain: “Our niggers wouldn’t act like this!” Indeed they had never seen “their niggers” demonstrate such self-confidence.

57. Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 99.

58. *The Papers*, 3:451.

Early in the protest, a group of teenage boys stood on a corner watching empty buses roll by. A police car pulled up. “What are you boys doing here?” one of the officers shouted. “I want you all to get away from this corner!”

One of the teenagers calmly walked over to the patrol car. “Mister,” he said, “I ain’t done nothin’. I ain’t goin’ nowhere. I’m going to stand where I damn am!” The befuddled officers drove away.⁵⁹

There was clearly a sense among boycott leaders that the self-image and self-esteem of blacks generally had been positively affected as a result of their part in the more-than-yearlong protest, but also that something positive had happened in the psyche of black youth throughout the South.

Early scholars on King seldom (if ever) referenced his admiration and praise for black children of Montgomery. We now know that even at that early period of his civil rights ministry he acknowledged the concerns of the children, how they were affected by the struggle, and their expectations for the future. King carried this memory with him when he left Montgomery and did not forget that the struggle for human dignity was as much about black children and young people as about adults. He would therefore welcome their contributions along the civil rights trail.

The Montgomery movement did much to inspire the passing of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, although both were much too watered down in comparison to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The latter was inspired by the struggle in what was arguably the most segregated city in the nation, Birmingham, Alabama. Later, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 would be spurred by the voting rights campaigns and struggles in other Deep South states such as Mississippi, and in Selma, Alabama.

59. Graetz, *Montgomery: A White Preacher's Memoir*, 107.

Need for Multiple Approaches

Prior to the Montgomery bus boycott (a direct-action approach), blacks' primary method of addressing issues of civil rights was through the NAACP method of litigation in the courts. This was a very methodical, albeit very slow method. What the Montgomery movement taught not only King and other leaders of that campaign, but prospective advocates for freedom and civil rights all over the country, was that the legal approach of the NAACP was not the only approach; that increasingly what were needed were multiple approaches working together. Montgomery depicted the simultaneous use of direct action *and* the litigation approach. It was thought by many that the mass direct-action approach could lead not only to more far-reaching results than the legal approach, but would enable individuals to participate directly in the struggle for civil rights through direct action. This message seemed to reverberate throughout the South and the nation—wherever the civil rights of blacks were impeded or outright denied. Fred Powledge provides an instructive and important comment in this regard.

There was . . . something deliciously inviting about the here-and-now nature of direct action that did not characterize the legal approach at all. Granted, the courtroom route, when finally followed to its ultimate conclusion in the Supreme Court, might result in a decision far more wide-ranging in terms of geography and political jurisdictions than a local boycott. (*Brown* showed, however, that court decisions did not necessarily insure speedy change.) Montgomery proved that there was nothing wrong, and a lot right, with using both approaches at once.⁶⁰

Not entirely surprising, NAACP legal defense hardliners such as the venerable Thurgood Marshall and John Morsell reportedly declared that had the boycotters in Montgomery stayed home and waited for

60. Powledge, *Free at Last?*, 85.

them to get the court's decision they could have saved themselves a lot of marching and trouble; that it was not so much the long boycott, but an NAACP lawsuit that actually led to the desegregation of Montgomery city buses.⁶¹ Always the dialectical thinker, and one who insisted on seeing and examining as much of the evidence as possible, Martin Luther King argued against an either-or approach to fighting for civil rights and freedom. The fact that he himself became a lifelong member of the NAACP when he arrived as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and frequently urged his members to join, indicated his appreciation for that organization's efforts. In addition, he was aware of the importance of the NAACP to his father and grandfather in their own efforts to achieve civil rights for blacks.

In 1958, King rejected the criticism that the NAACP was outmoded, arguing instead that it "has achieved excellence in the area of legal strategy and is doing an excellent job in that area."⁶² King argued for an approach that included virtually any method that focused on nonviolence as the means to civil rights, for example, the legal approach of the NAACP, the nonviolent direct-action approach of the SCLC and CORE, as well as potential contributions of the legislative and executive branches of the federal government.⁶³ He was quite clear, however, that the legal method had to be supplemented with direct-action methods. King persistently rejected the idea that he and SCLC were competing with the NAACP, or that their methods and aims were somehow in conflict with each other. He urged blacks and others to continue to support the NAACP.⁶⁴

Suffice it to say that the yearlong bus boycott helped create the opening for other approaches to the struggle for civil rights. It will therefore be instructive to provide at least a brief discussion on

61. *Ibid.*, 86.

62. *The Papers*, 4:434.

63. *Ibid.*, 4:435.

64. *Ibid.*, 4:174.

contributions made by sit-ins as well as student activists who bravely continued the Freedom Rides. Black college students initiated the sit-in movement in the early weeks of 1960. White students were quick to join in support. By joining with black students at segregated lunch counters, white students were subjected to the same insults and verbal abuse as their black peers. In many instances, the abuses toward white students were even more severe because local whites viewed them as “nigger lovers,” and in their narrow, perverted minds, there was nothing worse. White students also joined the Freedom Ride that was initiated by student activists from CORE that followed in the spring of 1961. When CORE activists were brutally attacked outside Anniston, Alabama its director, James Farmer, called off the rides. Diane Nash, a student at Fisk University and a youth activist, argued against this, saying that they must not allow violence to stop their efforts;⁶⁵ that if they did, opponents would always feel that in order to stop a civil rights demonstration in its tracks, all one need do is violently attack demonstrators. At Nash’s pleading, however, they were allowed to resume the Freedom Ride. As expected, when white students joined the Freedom Rides, they were bludgeoned with pipes, clubs, and bottles, just like black students. This is what happened when young people decided to sit-in, and/or take a ride for freedom.

65. Powledge, *Free at Last?*, 258, 262.