

## Video 19

### The Montgomery Bus Boycott, Part II

#### The Voice from the Pulpit

Over the weekend, as word spread about Rosa Park's arrest, plans were made to boycott the Montgomery buses on Monday, December 5. A meeting would be held at the Holt Street Baptist Church on Monday evening, to discuss the case, and to decide whether or not to continue the bus boycott.

A young pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church was asked to speak at the Monday evening meeting. He was initially reluctant to become involved in what might become an explosive racial confrontation. He was only 26 years old, he was a newcomer to Montgomery, he had been pastor at Dexter for only a little over a year, and most important, he and his wife Coretta had recently become the parents of their first child, a daughter named Yolanda Denise. His involvement in a bus boycott might well endanger his young family.

Nevertheless, Martin Luther King Jr. agreed to speak at the Monday evening meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church.

On Monday morning and all through the day, the buses of Montgomery were empty of black passengers. On Monday evening, the Holt Street Baptist Church was packed with 6,000 people; loudspeakers were set up outside so that people who could not get into the church could listen. Civil rights leaders from other cities in Alabama were seated in the pews. Journalists and even two television crews had come to document this first mass meeting . . . which would launch not only a bus boycott that lasted over a year, but the American Civil Rights Movement which spread throughout the nation for the next twelve years.

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke—many in the church now heard him for the first time—he emphasized two themes. He confirmed for his listeners that as American citizens, their boycott of the buses—and beyond that their protest against racial segregation—was justified by the American Constitution. And he reminded his listeners that they must abide by the Christian principles in which they firmly believed . . . and thus they must never lower themselves to the use of violence. They were Christians and they were Americans, demanding justice and equality for their people.

In his opening sentences, Dr. King stated, “We are here in a general sense because first and foremost we are American citizens.”

Voices from the congregation called back, in the tradition of the Negro church where responses are welcome, “That’s right.”

He continued, “We are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning.”

Further into his speech, Dr. King made clear, “And I want to say that we are not here advocating violence.” Voices responded, “No.”

“I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are Christian people. We believe in the Christian religion. We believe in the teachings of Jesus. The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest.” He paused during the prolonged applause.

Dr. King expressed clearly how Southern Negroes felt after generations of racial repression. “And you know, my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled by the iron feet of oppression.” Thundering applause. “There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged into the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair.”

His powerful voice now booming from the pulpit, he moved from the specifics of the bus boycott to the confirmation that their protest was sanctioned by both the American Constitution and the divine laws of God.

“But the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right.”

“My friends, I want it to be known that we’re going to work with grim and bold determination to gain justice on the buses in this city.”

“And we are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. If we are wrong, justice is a lie. Love has no meaning.”

Dr. King now merged the bus boycott with verses from the Book of Amos in the Bible, “And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

At this point, the responsive energy in the church was enormous.

“We, the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality.”

“Whatever we do, we must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all of our actions.”

Toward the end of his speech, he told his audience, “Right here in Montgomery, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, ‘There lived a race of people, a *black* people, “fleecy locks and black complexion,” a people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights.’”

(The quote is from a poem by William Cowper.)

Later during the meeting in the Holt Street Baptist Church, the black community voted their approval of a resolution to continue the bus boycott until the bus company met their three demands: for desegregated seating, polite behavior from the drivers, and the hiring of black bus drivers on routes through predominantly black neighborhoods.

On Tuesday morning, the buses were once again empty of black passengers, while people walked to work and walked to school with a new spirit in their hearts.

Thus during five days in December of 1955—because of a determined woman who stood her ground, because of a courageous man who spoke from the pulpit not only to the Negroes of Montgomery but to the citizens of America, and because of a brave people who felt the strength of their unity—the Montgomery bus boycott was launched. This non-violent movement brought profound changes to modern America, and inspired other protest movements throughout the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

We will continue our discussion of the American Civil Rights movement in the following talk.

\* \* \* \* \*

John Slade