

Introduction

In the preface to his book, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee*, Bobby Lovett writes that there are thousands of books on the civil rights movement, “but their focus is usually on great men and women, their memoirs, general movements across the south, and the popularly remembered events of the 1950s and 1960s.”¹ Few books, he argues, contain in-depth research about grassroots leadership. “The book *Vanderbilt Divinity School: Education, Contest and Change* (2001)...includes essays on Nashville civil rights leaders Kelly Miller Smith Sr. and James M. Lawson Jr., but such grassroots personalities often are missing from the bigger story.”² Pushing these “grassroots personalities” to the margins creates a problem for civil rights scholarship because it is often the leadership of these lesser-known figures like Smith and Lawson who most impacted the movement. Lovett’s claim that the Rev. James Morris Lawson Jr.’s influence on the movement has not been properly understood and researched is accurate, but ironically, Lawson’s role in the modern civil rights movement has been overshadowed in historical and theological scholarship largely because of the successes noted among the leaders he trained.

James Lawson first earned the national spotlight as a civil rights leader in Nashville, Tennessee as a student of divinity in 1958 and 1959, where, to use Lawson’s own words, he established “The Nashville Laboratory.”³ This “laboratory” was the testing ground for massive, non-violent civil disobedience, and the creative space where

¹ Bobby Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), x. See also Wesley C. Hogan, “*Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC’s Dream for a New America*,” (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 31

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*, 126

non-violent philosophical thought was sharpened and honed. Well known leaders C.T. Vivian, James Bevel, Diane Nash, and John Lewis were among the laboratory's non-violent class of 59," who under Lawson's tutelage, began sitting-in at downtown Nashville lunch counters months before four students at North Carolina's A&T College would be arrested for challenging segregation in Greensboro and changing the course of American History.⁴ The importance of Lawson's contribution to the movement, as evidenced in the success of the leaders he trained and his close personal relationship with Martin Luther King Jr.,⁵ as well as the void of understanding in current scholarship regarding Lawson's contribution is the warrant for in-depth study of James Lawson's life. For the purpose of this honors project, I will build on nearly 70 pages of accredited research that I have already completed to focus on three aspects of James Lawson's life. I will investigate James Lawson's political and theological influences, Lawson's influence on the tactics employed and philosophies espoused by major movement figures, and Lawson's role in the major battles in the modern civil rights movement.

The Proposal

I hope to use the Honors Program in the History department at Rhodes to fill a void in the current civil rights scholarship surrounding James Lawson's role in the modern civil rights movement. First, I will contend that while James Lawson did not invent the idea of active non-violent resistance to segregation he did perfect it. Lawson saw first hand how anger, fear, deception and hatred were embedded within the social structure of segregation, and as a minister he understood such evil could not be merely

⁴ David Halberstam, *The Children*, (New York, Random House: 1998), 91

⁵ Joan Turner Beifuss, *At The River I Stand*, (Memphis, St Lukes Press: 1990), pp. 172-182

defeated but instead must be transformed. In an interview I conducted with James Lawson in the Summer of 2006, he states that

My counseling, my teaching, my preaching was all directed to (transforming segregation). There was a strong feeling in black thought that stretches way back that says that. Howard Thurman in his 1947 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, said the gospel is a survival kit for those whose backs are against the wall...Thurman points out that anger, fear, deception and hatred are the four hounds of hell that often will be nipping at the heels of the oppressed.⁶

My research on James Lawson during my time as a fellow in the Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies demonstrated that Lawson was not content to simply destroy the system of segregation by destroying segregationists. He understood that segregation and violence were the products of spiritual depravity, and that non-violent direct action had the potential to restore humanity to the inhuman relationships between blacks and whites in *Jim Crow* America.

Non-violence is an alternative form of war, but it does not have the brutality of war or the abuse of power of war; and it seeks not to demonize in the process. It seeks rather to sow the seeds so that you can have the beginnings of reconciliation and healing, which war never does.⁷

Lawson was prepared to wage war on the social system of segregation, but he would not injure a human being in the process. This determination to transform *Jim Crow* grew from Lawson's conviction that segregation limited the ability of blacks and whites to experience a connectedness that could lead to personal and social redemption. George Kelsey articulated this idea in *The Christian Way of Race Relations*, a collection of essays published in 1948 and edited by William Stuart Nelson. In his essay, which shares the title of the book,

⁶ Anthony C. Siracusa, "Understanding Militant Non-violence within Memphis' Modern Civil Rights Movement: The Leadership and Witness of the Rev. James M Lawson Jr.," Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies Website, <http://www.rhodes.edu/academics/5846.asp>, p. 25

⁷ James M Lawson, interview by author, 23 July 2007

Kelsey writes “since God wills the redemption of every man (sic), since every soul is for God equally redeemable, since he maintains the relation between himself and every man from his side, every individual is of equal worth.”⁸ As a product of this black religious tradition, Lawson was acutely aware of the cost segregation tolled on humanity.

Theologians like Kelsey were a part of an intellectual tradition that said racial injustice was a systemic process of dehumanization, and for humanity to proceed according to a Christian ethic, that system must be re-created in ways which renewed relationships by emphasizing the value of blacks and whites because of their inherent humanity and their worth to God. As Christian minister in the late 1950s, this understanding fueled James Lawson’s commitment to racial justice. More than an outgrowth of his profession, this understanding was embedded within Lawson’s own self-image. “In its essential and normative nature,” George Kelsey wrote, “the Christian ethic is one of redemption.”⁹ This “imperative of redemption” for individuals and society drove the generation of black religious leaders before Lawson, and only increased in scope and importance during James Lawson’s ministry.

Perhaps foremost among Lawson’s many intellectual predecessors was Howard Thurman. The origins of Lawson’s ideology of spiritual resistance to and active transformation of segregation can be seen in many of Thurman’s writings. It was Thurman who coined the idea of that the “four hounds of hell”--anger, fear,

⁸ George D. Kelsey, “The Christian Way of Race Relations,” in *The Christian Way of Race Relations*, Ed. William Stuart Nelson, (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1948), 34

⁹ *ibid*, 42

deception and hatred—were constantly “nipping at the heels of the oppressed.” Thurman’s theology is perhaps best classified as “an emancipatory way of being, (as) moving towards a fundamentally unchained life that is available to all the women and men everywhere who hunger and thirst for righteousness, especially those with their ‘backs against the wall.’”¹⁰ Lawson found in Thurman’s book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, a spiritual philosophy that would allow black Americans to fight segregation “without losing their humanity or betraying their souls.”¹¹ Thurman will provide a starting point for tracing the lineage of “resistance ideology” in 20th century black American religious thought over 22 years. I will begin in 1936, the year Howard Thurman meets Gandhi in India and complete the study in 1958, the year James Lawson began to teach his philosophy of non-violence in Nashville.

A number of opportunities have prepared me for this portion of research. Foremost is the Directed Inquiry (DI) with Dr. Charles McKinney I completed in the Spring of 2008. The DI has given me familiarity with the discussion of race in American in the pre and post war period, and an introduction to a host of religious writers in the stated period.¹² History 405: *America Since 1945*, further enhanced my understanding of race in the national and international context during this period.

¹⁰ Vincent Harding, “Foreward,” in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), ii

¹¹ *ibid*, iii

¹² See Bibliography for a complete list of sources on the religious influences of James Lawson.

The second element of my thesis will build on Adam Fairclough's contention that Dr. King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) "exerted its greatest influence not through King, but through a student of theology at Vanderbilt University, James M. Lawson, Jr."¹³ Lawson distilled the non-violent philosophy and religious language of redemption espoused by early black American into tangible ideas at the heart of the movement and actionable objectives on the agendas of civil rights leaders. For example, in 1959, Lawson characterized the community building he did amongst Nashville students as the construction of a "Beloved Community," a term that would come to define King's vision for America and the goal of the civil rights struggle.¹⁴

In her new history of SNCC, Wesley Hogan writes that "the first time Lawson used this phrase, (John) Lewis immediately felt that it defined his own understanding."¹⁵ John Lewis captures the importance of Lawson's early workshops, the setting for a forging of the Beloved Community: "From the autumn of 1958 into the following fall that little (church building in Nashville First Baptist Church) played a major role in educating, preparing and shaping a group of young men and women who would lead the way for years to come in the non-violent struggle for civil rights in America."¹⁶ Lewis writes movingly about Lawson's workshops in his memoir, *Walking with the Wind*:

Wherever it is interrupted or delayed by forces that would resist it—by evil or hatred, by greed, by the lust for power, by the need for revenge—believers in the Beloved Community insist that it is the moral responsibility of men and women with soul force,

¹³ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 59. See also biographical info on Lawson pp. 59-61

¹⁴ Hogan, 22

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ John Lewis, 76

people of goodwill, to respond and struggle nonviolently against the forces that stand between a society and the harmony it naturally seeks.”¹⁷

Lewis makes clear that these early workshops were the cornerstone of the non-violent movement, and a hallmark of his own understanding of what the movement was about. The workshops provided students with the philosophy and tactics necessary to challenge jim crow in America, but most importantly, they equipped the students with the knowledge and skills to sustain a movement directed at ending the debasing of the human spirit which segregation had perpetrated against both blacks and whites. The story of these early Nashville workshops is the story of the non-violent movement’s humble beginnings, and the advent of the revolutionary public life of James Lawson.

Most scholarship emphasizes Lawson’s role in training these students, but does not continue the story of Lawson’s trainings into the 1960s. My research with the Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies in 2006 demonstrated that while Lawson was living and working in Memphis from 1962-1974, his focus was on training activists all over the nation. Thus, his work in Memphis is less impressive than the work he did for the campaigns in Birmingham, Selma and Mississippi. No published work currently exists on Lawson’s depicting in detail Lawson’s work in these campaigns.

Lawson’s impact on the broader movement did not start and stop with teaching. In February of 1960, Lawson wrote the founding statement for the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the most articulate synthesis of Christian thought, non-violent philosophy and activism to that point in the movement.¹⁸ Clayborne Carson makes mention of this fact, as do a number of secondary sources, but few books capture

¹⁷ Lewis, 78

¹⁸ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 23-24

the training that accompanied the lofty ideas in the statement, and little attention is given to Lawson's ongoing struggle to convince SNCC activists that non-violence still worked as the organization backed away from its adherence to non-violence in the mid 1960s.

Studying the movement in depth through two courses, History 343: *The Civil Rights Movement* and Religious Studies 2?? *The Modern Civil Rights Movement and the Theological Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.* confirms a decline in interest in non-violence, but no source spells out Lawson's argument for and work towards maintaining an army of non-violent demonstrators. Using secondary source materials, I can establish connections between Lawson's non-violent strategy and major moments in the movement. Using accounts like Lewis', I can likewise establish a link between Lawson's ideas (coming through the black religious tradition) and the ideology of major civil rights leaders and their organizations. To illustrate a direct connection to Lawson and movement leaders, I will use personal interviews with Lawson, the paper collections of SNCC and SCLC, and the personal paper collection of James Lawson.

Perhaps more than any other figure in the movement, James Lawson made possible sustained and effective non-violent protest during the modern civil rights struggle. Hogan contends that this was a result of Lawson's ability to connect direct action tactics to spiritual philosophy, a trait for which Martin Luther King has been lauded. And while he was not the singular influence, I will contend that Lawson was a primary influence that could distil the religious traditions of Howard Thurman into actionable objectives which underwrote much of the philosophy and tactical thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Finally, as an honors student I will create a historical narrative that connects James Lawson to the planning and execution of stratagem during the major battles of the modern civil rights struggle. Halberstam and Hogan have done an exhaustive job with Lawson's time in Nashville from 1958-1960, while Joan Turner Beifuss and Michael Keith Honey have written extensively on Lawson's involvement in the 1968 Sanitation Strike in Memphis. But much about Lawson's work from 1960 to 1968 is unknown. In 1959, James Lawson was appointed head of Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) direct-action committee, and in 1960, SCLC appointed James Lawson director of non-violent education.¹⁹ In April of 1963, SCLC met in Memphis, most likely at Lawson's church Centenary Methodist, to discuss the evolving Birmingham movement.²⁰ These references hint at Lawson's involvement but ultimately necessitate further primary source research, which I propose to excavate from paper collections of the SCLC. I will connect Lawson to the campaigns waged by SCLC in St. Augustine, Florida in 1961; Albany, Georgia in 1962; Birmingham, Alabama in 1963; and Selma, Alabama in 1965.

In 1963, SNCC prepared for its Freedom Summer of 1964 by training local activists in Mississippi. Crediting Lawson, Hogan juxtaposes the intensive and well-organized movement in the south with a demonstration in Cambridge on the 13, June 1963 where 350 white men created violent chaos as marchers fought back and fled. Northern SNCC activist Mary Suckle wrote that she stayed awake all that night with a shotgun across her lap. Hogan contend that this was "a hint of the breakdown of the non-

¹⁹ Michael Keith Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Movement and Martin Luther King Jr.'s Last Stand*. (New York: Norton Press, 2007), 79

²⁰ Fairglough, 124

violent ethic in the face of a fast-developing repression and a lack of training workshops for what James Lawson termed ‘revolutionary non-violence.’”²¹ Hogan attributes the failure of northern non-violence to a lack of non-violent mentors like Lawson and Ella Jo Baker, which were hard at work during the Freedom Summer of 1964.²²

Using primary sources from the paper collections of the organizations making up the Council of Federated Organizations (CORE, SNCC, and the NAACP), I intend to research Lawson’s impact on the Freedom Summer of 1964, and specifically, his role in preparing students for the experience, his role in leading them in Mississippi, and his ability to sustain non-violence in the face of increasing white violence. The SCLC papers will also assist me in documenting Lawson’s role in hosting the Meredith March Against Fear in 1966, and his role in SCLC in the years between the Meredith march and the Sanitation strike.

In addition to the sources listed above, I will attempt to contact Rev. Lawson for an interview as I conduct my research, a privilege he has granted me during previous research endeavors. I have inquired about preliminary access to the ever-growing but non-public collection of James Lawson’s papers recently donated to the Vanderbilt University Library, offering to serve as an archivist in the spring semester organizing the paper collection, an opportunity that History 460 will afford me. Work in the archive would provide an opportunity to learn more about Lawson’s involvement in the movement in addition to experience in a professional archive. Access to Lawson’s paper collection would prove to be an invaluable resource in managing the scope of my research for this project.

²¹ Hogan, 127

²² Hogan, 131

Conclusion

James Lawson's influence on the modern civil rights movement and the ongoing struggle for justice for all peoples has not been duly researched or represented. Capturing the gravity of Lawson's impact, historian Sudarshar Kapur writes "nonviolent trainers such as James Lawson and Bayard Rustin proved central to the ultimate success of the modern African American freedom movement."²³ During my time as an Honors Student in the Department of History at Rhodes College, I will build upon the research I have already done to fully qualify Kapur's claim, while simultaneously filling a gap in the historical record.

To understand Lawson's contribution to the movement is to understand the architecture of the movement, the actions that created social, political and economic change, and the philosophy necessary to maintain the momentum of change. As a contribution to our understanding of the modern civil rights struggle, and more importantly, to our understanding of social movements in general, research on James Lawson will prove historically significant and applicable, if not essential, to our contemporary setting. With approval from this department, I will research the religious figures that influenced James Lawson's theology, his success in communicating the ideas and actionable objectives of those early thinkers to his contemporaries, and his ability to mobilize others during the key moments of the modern African American freedom struggle.

²³ Sudarshar Kapur, *The African American Experience with Gandhi*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 162