
Civil Rights: Myths and Realities

I. Introduction

A. Stories about the Civil Rights Movement

1. A morally uplifting story in which the Civil Rights Movement (1955-1965) was supported by Christians and largely solved the problem of racism in the United States

B. In this video, we are going to look at some of the persistent myth of the Civil Rights Movements in the hopes that, by knowing the realities, we will not take comfort in incomplete myths but can wrestle with the challenges presented by a truer, but more complicated, history.

II. Myth Number One: the Civil Rights Movement was a southern movement that started in 1955 with the Montgomery Bus Boycott and ended in 1965 with the Voting Rights Act.

A. Reality: Africans Americans fought for a very long time, both before and after what we consider “the Civil Rights Movement” and that fight was not confined to the South.

1. Problem with the myth: makes it easy to think that once African Americans began protesting racial injustice, the majority of white (Christian) Americans responded positively and quickly.

B. Long Civil Rights Movement: decades of fighting against segregation and racial injustice.

1. Black Christian women played a significant role.

2. Some white Christians fought for racial equality, but more often those who worked against racial injustice worked for a more benevolent forms of segregation.

C. Civil Rights Movement did not end in 1965

1. Between 1955 and 1965, Civil Rights Movement fought for concrete changes and focused on the U.S. South.

2. After 1965, the Civil Rights Movement focused more on systematic, national issues.

III. Myth Number Two: the Civil Rights Movement was widely supported, at least outside the South.

A. Reality: Many Americans, particularly white Americans, disapproved of the Civil Rights Movement's tactics.

B. Polling

1. Majorities of Americans supported the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act but many wanted moderate enforcement, rejected further civil rights legislation, and disagreed with the tactics of mass demonstrations.

C. Both white moderates and white liberals disappointed Civil Rights workers

IV. Myth Number Three: Christians overall were on the side of the Civil Rights Movement.

A. Reality: Christians could be found on all sides of the Civil Rights Movement playing often contradictory roles.

B. Some Christians resisted the Civil Rights Movement's strategy of mass demonstrations and legal changes, arguing instead for individual regeneration and more moral voters.

1. Civil Rights workers responded that changed laws were necessary in order for black people to have their constitutional rights respected and that there was little evidence that regenerate individuals alone would end racial injustice.

C. Some Christians resisted the changes brought by Civil Rights

D. Some Christians understood the Civil Rights Movement as an affirmation of fundamental Christian beliefs.

E. For Christians involved in the Civil Rights Movement, Christian faith provided hope in the face of violence and resistance.

V. Myth Number Four: the Civil Rights Movement did not criticize the United States.

A. Reality: Civil Rights workers criticized the country and were often perceived as being hostile to it.

1. Many Americans thought that Communists were deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

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2. King, among others, offered significant criticisms of the United States, claiming that racism was a longstanding part of the country's identity.

VI. Conclusion

A. Why let go of the comforting myths?

1. Makes it too easy to believe I would have supported the movement.
2. Makes it too easy to believe my faith naturally leads me to support what is good and right.