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James Lawson's Speech at Shaw University: Deconstructing Conflicting Ideologies to Help
Establish the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

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ABSTRACT

On April 15th, 1960 Reverend James Lawson delivered a keynote address to an assembly of students at Shaw University. The students had arrived at Shaw in response to the imperfectly coordinated sit-in movement that had begun less than two months earlier. This thesis will enumerate the various challenges Lawson had to overcome in his speech in order to convince the students to create the first student-led civil rights organization. In particular, Lawson had to convince the students to adopt an organizational mission of nonviolent direct action – a strategy that conflicted with the legal maneuvers of traditional civil rights organization such as the NAACP. Moreover, Lawson’s belief that the students should form a civil rights organization free from adult intervention, opposed Martin Luther King Jr.’s opinion that the student movement should act as an auxiliary branch of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Therefore, Lawson had to employ various rhetorical strategies in order to unite a student-led movement under the philosophy of nonviolent direct action. Specifically, Lawson employed language that extended the breadth of the student movement into the realm of spiritual/moral redemption and portrayed adult civil rights activists’ tactics as inadequate compared to the potential of the sit-in’s nonviolent direct action approach. In total, Lawson delivered an impassioned speech that would unite the student-led movement under the philosophy of nonviolent direct action. His speech reaffirmed the students’ commitment to the sit-in movement, united the student organization under the banner of Christian nonviolence, and established the student movement’s autonomy from adult activists. In doing so, the thesis testifies to the complexities of decision making that civil rights activists had to make during the Civil Rights Movement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iii

Chapter 1 Introduction 1

Chapter 2 Background 6

Chapter 3 Analysis of Lawson’s Speech at Shaw University 33

Chapter 4 Conclusion..... 50

BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 52

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Leadership can come from anywhere. You don’t have to be a certain type of person or have a certain type of education to be a leader. You just have to be willing to throw yourself into the fight. That’s all it takes.”

Julian Bond (Bond, quoted in Williams)

At a famous conference at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina from April 15-18th, 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed. Ella Baker, then the executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), organized the conference with an eight-hundred-dollar donation from the SCLC in response to the students’ national sit-in movement that had been ignited by activists in Greensboro, North Carolina on February 1st. Over two hundred people attended the Shaw conference, including one hundred and twenty student delegates from fifty-eight southern communities, observers from the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and other representatives from the American Friends Service Committee and National Student Association. On Friday night, April 15 – the day before the conference’s panels and group discussions began – the gathered students sang “We Shall Overcome.” However, what the students had joined together to overcome was unclear. The students had arrived at Shaw, unified by the impromptu and imperfectly coordinated sit-in demonstrations, but they were unsure what the next steps would be and what principles would guide their actions moving forward. In the midst of this uncertainty, James Lawson took the stage to deliver the keynote address – the

address that is the subject of this thesis.

It is well known that SNCC was formed during the Shaw Conference in April 1960 and that James Lawson delivered the keynote speech. Yet the particulars of James Lawson's speech and its subsequent effect on the formation of SNCC during the conference have not been fully explained. For instance, Clayborne Carson in his book, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, observes that Lawson's speech "expressed a visionary set of ideas that distinguished the student activists both from the rest of society and from more moderate civil rights leaders" and acknowledged that Lawson's speech challenged the traditional philosophy of leading civil rights organizations and activists. However, Carson overlooks the difficult challenges Lawson faced in order to guide the students to accept a movement governed by the principles of Christian love and nonviolence. As Kirt H. Wilson evokes in his essay, "Interpreting the Discursive Field of the Montgomery Bus Boycott: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Holt Street Address," our collective interpretation of the Civil Rights narrative is more generally too inattentive to the complicated and calculated decisions that the organizations and activists had to make.

A central decision facing Lawson and his listeners was about tactics: should activists offer armed resistance and other forms of self-defense to allow civil rights organizations to operate in hostile, Southern communities? Or should the civil rights movement be left to the legal maneuvers of the NAACP, which had been so successful in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision? Or should the non-violent tactics advocated by Martin Luther King Jr. be adopted more broadly? However, even King – the quintessential symbol of nonviolence – had struggled to fully embrace the philosophy of nonviolence prior to the 1960s (Lewis 116).

Lawson delivered the keynote speech at Shaw University when the direction of the Civil Rights

Movement was convoluted by competing ideologies. Therefore, his speech provides a window through which to view the uncertain civil rights environment following the sit-in demonstrations. In effect, this thesis offers a more accurate appreciation of the intricate social politics Lawson had to navigate in order to help establish SNCC.

Given the competing philosophies represented by the students and members of civil rights organizations who heard him on April 15th, Lawson, in his speech, had to address many challenges in order to successfully unite the student movement under an umbrella organization. First, Lawson had to navigate the competing philosophies of other Civil Rights organizations. The NAACP specialized in litigation; CORE emphasized direct action in Northern communities; and the SCLC operated through Southern black church communities (Hogan 8). In short, in order to align the Civil Rights Movement under the banner of nonviolent direct action, as it would come to do during the first half of the 1960s, Lawson had to separate the student movement from the traditional civil rights organizations and forge a distinct identity for the nascent student-led organization.

Second, while Lawson's speech drew from certain philosophical aspects of each organization – CORE's emphasis on direct action and the SCLC's focus on the Christian principles – he had to construct a student organization that didn't simply act as an auxiliary branch of an existing civil rights organization. King recognized Lawson's capacity to train people to move from the nonviolent philosophy to direct action and believed the student organization should operate under the executive structure of the SCLC (Burns 292 - 295). By contrast, Ella Baker, one of King's closest colleagues, believed the new student organization should operate autonomously from existing civil rights organizations. In effect, Lawson's speech had to address the logistical aspects of organizational structure. The students needed to

clarify their organizational power structure and, most importantly, their mission.

Third, although the grass roots student movements that exploded following the Greensboro sit-ins were united in opposing segregated lunch counters, the underlying motivations for their actions were inconsistent. For example, the Greensboro Four conducted their first sit-ins on an impulse in response to Jim Crow prejudice (Herr 12), while the Atlanta student sit-in movement was more calculated: Atlanta students rallied behind an agenda that would address social inequities within the African American community such as quality of life, education, housing, and employment (Grady-Willis 42). Meanwhile, Lawson's Nashville group was the only student led movement that had been principled on the fundamentals of Christian love and a willingness to go to jail. Thus, Lawson faced the challenge of uniting the student movements under a common theme of Christian love and Gandhian nonviolence.

This thesis will address these challenges Lawson had to accommodate when he spoke on April 15th and report on how he crafted his speech to create SNCC. In doing so, the thesis will support Wilson's effort to do justice to the complexities of decision making during the civil rights movement. Specifically, the essay will highlight how Lawson's speech navigated the uncertain environment following the sit-in demonstrations of February 1960. The essay will offer background on Lawson's personal history, the social context surrounding the conference, and the events that led up to the Shaw conference – to clarify the multiple approaches that were competing for recognition in the new organization. Then the essay will offer a detailed analysis of the rhetorical strategies Lawson employed during the speech to motivate the students to form and independent SNCC under the framework of Christian nonviolence. Lawson's speech thus represents a pivotal moment in Civil Rights history where he successfully galvanized the student generation behind the principles of Gandhian nonviolence and direct action. Moreover, analysis

of Lawson's speech allows the reader to understand the complex interactions between civil rights organizations – notably the NAACP and SCLC – and their influence over the formation of SNCC. Additionally, the essay provides invaluable insights into the psychology of the student movement, the intra-generational disputes between the student population, and the inter-generational conflict with the adult leadership within organizations such as the SCLC and the NAACP. Overall, the thesis provides a counter-narrative to the normalized understanding of the civil rights movement's inevitable acceptance of nonviolent direct action by reconstructing the intricate social politics Lawson had to navigate to create a SNCC founded on the principles of Christian love.

Chapter 2

Background

Interpreting James Lawson's speech on April 15th, 1960 requires a deeper understanding of Lawson's own intellectual/personal background, an appreciation of the events in Nashville that preceded the Shaw Conference, and an account of the exchanges between civil rights leaders just prior to April 15th. A greater understanding of the historical context preceding Shaw University will allow the reader to recognize the uncertainty of the civil rights environment and the struggles Lawson would need to address in his speech in order to align a student-led organization under the principles of nonviolent direct action.

Although the sit-in movement spread quickly and attracted national media attention following the Greensboro sit-ins of February 1960, the student movement was largely uncoordinated. Some movements were motivated by political injustice, others were influenced by adult activists, and a few even reverted to violent outbreaks. So how did Lawson's speech convince the students assembled at Shaw to construct a cohesive civil rights organization? Moreover, James Lawson, whom Martin Luther King Jr. would call "the world's leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence," struggled to accept the concept of nonviolence throughout his childhood (Lefer, Article). So how did he convince the students at Shaw – where many doubted their ability to resist self-defense – to accept the organizational concept of pacifism founded in Christian love? In addition, established civil rights leaders such as Ella Baker and Martin Luther King Jr. maintained conflicting opinions on the future role of a student-led organization. So how did Lawson's speech navigate the competing philosophies regarding the role of students in the

overall civil rights struggle? Together this background information will elaborate on these particular struggles that Lawson needed to accommodate during his speech at Shaw University.

I. Who Was James Lawson?

James “Jim” Lawson was born in 1928 in Uniontown, Pennsylvania but was raised in Massillon, Ohio where his father practiced as the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Minister. Lawson grew up in a family divided on the issue of nonviolence. His father, James Lawson Sr., was a proud man who taught his children to defend themselves against verbal and physical attacks. One day, when Jim was six years old, he was followed by a group of white boys who insisted that one particular boy could beat him up. His father, who was home, heard the children jeering at his son and said, “You better get outside and fight that other boy” (Halberstam 53). On the other hand, Jim’s mother advocated a philosophy guided by love and quietly subverted her husband’s preference for self-defense. On another occasion during Lawson’s childhood, a white schoolmate directed a racial slur at him. Instinctively, Lawson lashed out and slapped the child in the face. When he returned home and relayed the story to his mother, she responded, “What good did that do, Jimmy?... With all that love what does that stupid insult do? It’s nothing, Jimmy, it’s empty. Just ignorant words from an ignorant child who is gone from your life the moment it was said” (Halberstam 54).

Moreover, Lawson’s later preference for pacifism contradicted the national African American community’s prevailing culture of armed resistance during the 1920s and 1930s. Following World War I, race riots broke out in Washington D.C., Houston, and other American cities where African-American, combat-experienced veterans organized the protection of black neighborhoods. Lawson Sr. embodied the qualities of what many African American intellectuals

hailed as the “New Negro,” a black man who engaged in armed resistance to suppress the prevalence of white supremacist terrorism following World War I (Foley 220).

Reflecting back on his childhood, Lawson would say he was privileged. He was not privileged in the monetary sense – Lawson’s mother had to raise nine children off of an annual \$1,000 church salary – but he was privileged in the sense that he respected his parents and the values they had instilled in him. Whatever their differences in philosophy, his parents had taught Lawson to appreciate the value of education. Lawson recalled that despite his skin color, many of his teachers indulged his academic capacity. One teacher even implied that Lawson could teach the lesson plan better than himself (Halberstam 57). In addition, Lawson’s mother had taught him to love and treat each individual with compassion. Instead of hardening Jim to the world, she taught him to embrace and love it. However, although Lawson’s mother’s philosophy provided a foundation for Christian nonviolence that his later studies and experiences would reinforce, he struggled to full-heartedly embrace nonviolence throughout most of his childhood.

In many respects, Lawson grew up with celebrity status in the small town of Massillon, Ohio. He came from a well-respected family within the African American community, and his academic achievements were well known. In high school, Lawson became a champion debater when he argued for a preemptive atomic strike on the Soviet Union to prevent the spread of Communism, an argument that would later clash with his pacifist mentality (Luker 279). What would become of such a talented young man? Despite suggestions from people in his father’s congregation to become a doctor or lawyer, Lawson felt an innate pull toward the ministry. He admired his father for the pride he took as a minister and the way he conducted his life without bitterness. Lawson would later recall how listening to his father preach had left a profound

impact on him. He could remember the powerful emotions that permeated the church while his father delivered a sermon. Moreover, he recognized that these emotions did not percolate down from the heavens, but they stirred within each person in the congregation. He felt that this form of emotional empowerment must persist throughout the week, not solely during Sunday services. In this way, Lawson was constructing a personal ideology that people were to be differential to the service of God, especially in light of God-given talent and intelligence (Dreier 300).

After Lawson had graduated from high school, he attended Baldwin-Wallace, a United Methodist College in Berea, Ohio. When he enrolled at Baldwin-Wallace, Lawson had yet to form his own political ideology. In fact, besides his mother's lessons to love others unconditionally, Lawson had lived his life unaware of pacifism. However, during these collegiate years, Lawson had become acquainted with the accomplishments of Mohandas Gandhi. He was mesmerized by Gandhi's ability to transform India's social system without force. Soon, Lawson became a political activist without really recognizing it. He believed that the prevailing attitude of the time was for nonwhite peoples to rid themselves of colonial rule, and yet oppressors maintained a rigid social hierarchy through race and poverty. Eventually, Lawson found himself testing the limits of all-white restaurants in different Midwestern cities during Methodist youth conferences. While these Midwestern cities lacked the overt racism characteristic of Southern communities, he determined that racially prejudiced undertones still remained ingrained in the North. Unsurprisingly then, during Lawson's freshman year at Baldwin-Wallace, he joined the local chapter of the Fellowship for Reconciliation, where he was introduced to workshops advocating nonviolence.

That same year, FOR sponsored a visit to Baldwin-Wallace of A.J. Muste, the organization's executive secretary. Muste became an important figure in Lawson's life because

he added historical context to Lawson's preliminary acceptance of pacifism. He discussed the Norwegian and Dutch nonviolent responses to Nazi Germany and elaborated on the venerable heroics of Gandhi. By the end of Muste's short visit, Lawson was beginning to subscribe to the notion that Christian love – the ability to love someone who was supposed to be your enemy – could reshape America's racially fraught social system. With this newfound belief in pacifism and Christian love, Lawson refused to acknowledge the draft notice he received during his senior year at Baldwin-Wallace. Lawson spent thirteen months in prison for declining to fight in the Korean War, even though he had already decided to pursue a career in the clergy and, therefore, could have been granted clerical deferment. He could not fathom the idea that he could defer while others were required to serve (Dreier 302). He could not compromise his moral integrity.

While Lawson had begun to commit himself to a life of pacifism, following *Brown v. Board of Education*, racially motivated hate crimes – lynching, night raids, beatings, etc. – increased throughout the Southern United States. Consequently, African American communities embraced the culture of armed resistance throughout Southern communities. Armed resistance signified the African American community's recognition that owning a firearm could provide themselves with a viable means to protect themselves, their families, and their businesses. Notably, Charles E. Cobb, a former field secretary for SNCC and author of the book *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*, has complicated Martin Luther King Jr.'s image as a resolute advocate for nonviolent resistance. In an interview, Cobb remarked how “If you went to King's house in 1955 or 1956, there were guns... When they bombed his house in 1956, [King's] first instinct was to apply for a gun permit. He [moved] toward nonviolence slowly” (The Associated Press, Article).

After his imprisonment, Lawson decided to attend Oberlin College to receive a master's degree in divinity studies. During this time, he served as a Methodist missionary in Nagpur, India. Here, Lawson intended to envelop himself and devote his time to understanding how Gandhi employed nonviolent tactics in order to release the nation from Britain's colonial grip. Lawson's missionary trip to India further solidified his adherence to principles of nonviolence. In a letter Lawson wrote to his fellow missionaries titled "Brief Chronological Statement of my Conversion to Christian Pacifism," Lawson stated, "As I recall it now, Jesus Christ, Himself, called me to be a pacifist in all affairs. Or perhaps one should say, called me to be like him in all affairs" (Lawson Papers, Brief Chronological Statement on my Conversion to a Christian Pacifist). Lawson believed that, as Christ suffered, he was similarly meant to endure the pain and sorrow of America's fraught racial history until all men and women might truly accept Christian, unconditional love. Unfortunately, Lawson also believed that the African American community and American public more generally was incapable of adopting a movement founded on the basis on nonviolent philosophy. He believed his duty was to continue bearing this burden – Jesus's metaphorical cross so to speak. However, in the midst of his missionary assignment, Lawson read a newspaper article regarding a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. To Lawson, the article offered evidence that the African American Civil Rights Movement was ready for the next step: adopting a nonviolent philosophy. Additionally, Lawson also recognized that the boycott movement was led by a young minister roughly the same age as himself, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr (Lawson Papers, Article).

In effect, Lawson returned from his missionary trip as a nonviolent radical activist. Encouraged by the nonviolent philosophy expressed in Montgomery, he began to conduct FOR discussion groups pertaining to the power of nonviolence and how it could be used to mobilize

the African American Civil Rights Movement (Lawson Papers, Workshop Paper). Lawson disagreed with the leading organization's tendencies to win social equality battles through court rulings and legislation. Although Lawson remained optimistic that the movement was beginning to accept nonviolent resistance, he thought the vast majority of leaders in local communities were not seriously committed to Christian nonviolence (Lawson, Notes). Therefore, even though Lawson believed Christian love and nonviolence could mobilize the movement towards social equality, he was still unsure how the movement could best employ a nonviolent philosophy. For instance, the FOR discussions centered around deliberating broad questions pertaining to the relationship between nonviolence and the movement: is religion necessary to love? How can love be harnessed to the solution of specific and pressing social issues? What evidence is there for the power of love in situations of danger and conflict (Lawson, Workshop Paper)? Lawson knew he had the right philosophy to accelerate the movement towards social justice; however, he was searching to find the proper way to employ the tactic.

While finishing his studies at Oberlin, Lawson connected with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during a conference the college had sponsored. King recognized Lawson's innate talents and the important role he could play in transitioning the movement towards a philosophy of nonviolent resistance. Consequently, King urged Lawson to move south immediately where his nonviolent philosophy was needed most. Lawson packed his bags and moved to Nashville, Tennessee where he could continue his studies at the Vanderbilt Divinity School and simultaneously serve as the social action leader of the local SCLC chapter.

II. Nashville

James Lawson arrived in Nashville in 1958. Here, Lawson, as a Vanderbilt Divinity School student, began to conduct workshops founded on the principles of nonviolence while he prepared for the ministry. Students from four local colleges initially attended – Fisk, American Baptist College, Meharry Medical School, and Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University. Although “Jim Crow” law ruled throughout the city and in the mind of the city’s white population, Nashville experienced a surge in social activism during 1950s. Following World War II, the African American community began to fight back against the city’s “separate but equal” philosophy. As President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Kelly Miller Smith launched a series of legal cases demanding equal teacher salaries, abolishing segregated public spaces, and dismantling the Tennessee poll tax, which disenfranchised a large portion of the African American community (The Tennessee Encyclopedia). Kelly Miller Smith was a minister who sought to achieve civil rights by preaching the Social Gospel. In other words, Smith shifted from Christianity’s focus on the afterlife toward the Christian obligation to fight for social justice. In effect, Smith laid the foundation of a Nashville civil rights movement that could be founded on Christian values (Taylor 73).

Following *Brown vs. Board of Education*, white racial animosity began to harden throughout Nashville. The city’s school board instituted the “Nashville Plan” in 1957, which stated that only one grade per year would be desegregated: it was a gradualist approach by design. But following the city’s announcement to integrate the schools, Hattie Cotton Elementary was bombed, destroying an entire wing of the school (Doyle 68). The people who perpetrated the bombing were never indicted, but it was easy to conclude that the bombing had been the act of segregationists.

In response to the bombing, Smith began to question the NAACP's vision to enact change through legislation. He believed the movement needed to adopt a philosophy that directly combated the Jim Crow system (DeGregory 59). Drawing inspiration from what King had accomplished in Montgomery, Smith founded the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC) in January of 1958. The conference described its mission this way: "Adhering to the principle of nonviolent love and action, the NCLC seeks to apply the central tenets of the Judeo-Christian faith to the problems of injustice, discrimination and segregation" (Kelly Miller Smith Papers). While Lawson arrived in Nashville during a moment when the city's racial tensions were swelling, Kelly Miller Smith had laid the basis for real a civil rights movement that could be constructed around a Christian, nonviolent ideology.

When James Lawson arrived to Nashville upon request of Martin Luther King Jr., Smith immediately promoted Lawson to the social action leader of the local SCLC chapter. Immediately, Lawson began to organize workshops centered around nonviolence and its role in the Movement. Initially, the students were underwhelmed by these workshops. They had attended them with the preconception that Lawson would teach them to embrace a new form of political radicalism; but instead, they were lectured on unconditional love and self-love. Moreover, Lawson's workshops advocated against hierarchical leadership (Robnett 99). He believed unilateral leadership within the Civil Rights Movement made executives feel they were more important than they really were and that such leadership convinced the white population that all they had to do was arrest the leaders to end a protest. Instead, Lawson preached to the students that the Movement's power did not reside within individuals, but within each individual's capacity to adhere to Christian nonviolence (Halberstam 233). In fact, Lawson

designated a different person to lead each workshop's discussion with the intention to disperse the leadership responsibilities across the students who participated in the Nashville movement.

Lawson's workshops advocated for each student to embrace nonviolent direct action. He had to teach each person to rise above the natural tendency to strike back upon hearing racial slurs or experiencing physical abuse. In effect, the workshops simulated experiences activists might encounter in public during nonviolent demonstrations. Lawson even taught the students how to curl up on the ground in order to protect their internal organs and their heads from punches if white agitators reverted to violent behaviors (Diane Nash, PBS Interview). By the spring of 1959, approximately one year before the Greensboro sit-ins, Lawson and his students began to formulate the notion of conducting a sit-in at Nashville's segregated lunch counters.¹

It took time for many future leaders from the Nashville Movement such as Diane Nash, Marion Barry, and James Bevel to adopt Lawson's nonviolent philosophy. James Bevel and Marion Barry were displeased with the students who had initially assumed leadership roles at Lawson's workshops. Bevel believed that these students represented the kind of young men who college administrators liked to promote as model student leaders. They were career oriented individuals who sought approval from their elders. Bevel believed that whoever was to lead this movement must be willing to take risks and, at the minimum, take risks that the dean of a black college would find unacceptable. Eventually, Bevel's assumption proved correct. As racial

¹ Lawson and his students were not the first people to think of sit-ins as a means to enact social change. In particular, CORE had launched a relatively unsuccessful sit-in campaign in St. Louis as early as 1948 to desegregate local lunch counters (Kimbrough 135). Moreover, the Wichita NAACP Youth Council orchestrated the first successful sit-in movement at the counters of Dockum, a popular eatery in the city. After twenty-three days of repeated demonstrations, the store owner succumbed to the activists' demands and served them food. The national NAACP refused to sanction the sit in demonstrations on the basis that it was not an approved NAACP tactic. The national leadership was reluctant to accept this new form of protests, where children placed themselves on the front line of the action (The Dockum Sit-In, PBS video).

tensions on the streets of Nashville increased, these students disappeared swiftly. Similarly, Marion Barry stressed his dissatisfaction with these initial student leaders. However, he attributed these students' fear of retribution from their respective universities to a sharp class line that existed within the African American community. The more upper-middle class you were, Barry believed, the less likely you were to be involved with Lawson's workshops (Halberstam 104). Both Barry and Bevel evoke the underlying argument in E. Franklin Shazier's book, *The Black Bourgeoisie*; that upper middle class African Americans were more concerned with advancing in the white economy than empathizing with the struggle of the collective African American population.

James Bevel grew up in rural Mississippi acutely aware of racial violence – lynching, night raids, etc. He didn't believe nonviolence could drive social change, and he thought Lawson's idealistic belief in pacifism ignored the brutal realities of racism. In total, Bevel believed Lawson was afraid, afraid to fight back against the brutal system that had brutally oppressed him. However, Lawson eventually converted Bevel to accept Christian nonviolence by discussing how Gandhi had been influenced by Tolstoy's novel *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*. The book had changed Bevel's perspective on life while he served in the Navy (Dreier 303). He finally decided that Lawson was no longer driven by fear, but instead a man like Gandhi, who had served time in prison for his convictions and devoted three years of his life to study Gandhi. Soon, Bevel, along with his peers, perceived Lawson as a man with unfaltering conviction, whose power resided in his willingness to submit himself to prison rather than compromising his moral commitment to Christian nonviolence.

Furthermore, Lawson's workshops began to challenge the traditional perception of African American college students. Prior to the 1960s, African American college students

typically stayed away from political activism. E. Franklin Shazier, an African American sociologist, portrayed black students as politically apathetic and focused on material wealth. Rather than facing his students' inclination to self-defend themselves – a tendency Lawson had to overcome in his childhood – Lawson had to debunk the myth of the indifferent, African American college student and break the traditional civil rights tactic of respectability politics. Lawson had to motivate his students to embrace a new form of nonviolent, civil disobedience, despite disagreements from civil rights leaders and his students' parents.

Particularly, the notion of breaking the law and going to prison divided leading civil rights activists at the time. For example, Joseph H. Jackson, a civil rights activist and Baptist preacher, echoed the philosophy of the NAACP to enact civil rights through adherence to law and order. He believed nonviolent direct action would “substitute panic and anarchy in the place of law and order” (Joseph Jackson, Address). Many of the Nashville students also struggled to accept a “jail, no bail” philosophy. Specifically, John Lewis stated that, “Growing up in the rural South, it was not the thing to do, to go to jail. It was bringing shame and disgrace on the family” (Halberstam 222). Bernard Lafayette often received letters from his mother condemning him for attending Lawson's nonviolent direct action workshops. In one letter his mother asked “What are you fighting for?... Remember, God will straighten out everything if you just get in line” (Dreier 302). Julian Bond – a sit-in leader from Atlanta – echoed similar reservations from his parents. Bond's father believed education was the path to progress. In an interview, Bond stated, “The idea was that you entered [college] and four years later you got out and got a degree and then you got a job or went to grad school or your life went on. You didn't disrupt this flow.” Creating student leaders within the civil rights movement meant to interfere with the routine “flow” of a college education (Julian Bond Interview, 2 November 1999). Lawson's workshops

had added pressure to the diverging philosophies between the adult and student generation.

While the adult generation largely advocated for a form of respectability politics where civil rights advancements occurred within rules of the legislative system, Lawson had to convince the student generation to disrupt the accepted function of respectability politics. In addition, Lawson had to convince the students to become leaders within the Civil Rights movement, which meant many students would have to put their college education on hold.

Finally, Lawson faced the challenge of dismantling the traditional portrayal of African American college students as politically apathetic and imbued with white-middle class values. Generally speaking, African American students embraced the Cold War orthodoxy that advocated for conformity with white American values and cautioned black students to stay away from breaking social order (Taylor 130). Even Howard Zinn, a civil rights scholar and activist, noted that his students “were going about their duties trying to just move up the ranks of society, and it seemed as if that was all that interested them” (Greenberg 28). Diane Nash, a future leader of the civil rights movement, had to overcome this political indifference. She was raised on the south side Chicago in a middle class family who ignored the role of race in America. Her parents had made it from Mississippi to Chicago and, therefore, decided to enjoy the benefits that migration conferred politically and economically. Consequently, her family raised her to be a “good American, and show that blacks could be just as loyal as any whites” (Halberstam 232). Once she enrolled at Fisk University, Nash’s political activism awoke when she noticed the racist signs at the Tennessee State Fair. Lawson’s workshops offered a community where she could surround herself with students who had similarly experienced political awakenings and could discuss how the principles of nonviolent direct action could lead their actions. Thus, while the adult generation largely advocated for a form of respectability politics, where civil rights

advancements occurred within rules of the legislative system, Lawson had convinced his students to adopt nonviolent civil disobedience as their direct tactic.

Above all else, Lawson conducted these workshops in order to develop the student's irresolute commitment to Christian nonviolence. If nonviolent direction was the means to achieve social justice, Lawson believed Christian love was the foundation upon which the movement rested. Thus, Lawson conducted workshop after workshop, drilling the concept of nonviolent direct action into the psyche of his students. By December of 1959, Lawson and his students settled on the idea of conducting demonstrations at Nashville's segregated lunch counters. Christmas came and the students scattered back to their homes for the holidays. There was an unspoken agreement that upon the student's return they would conduct their first sit-in demonstration in February 1960.

III. The Sit-Ins Begin

But the demonstrations didn't begin in Nashville after all. Instead, on February 1st, 1960 four African American college students from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College walked into the local Woolworth's department store in Greensboro, sat down at the "whites-only counter," and ordered a cup of coffee. They were refused service; however, they continued to sit and wait politely at the counter until the store closed. These four students, Ezell Blair, David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil, acted upon suppressed resentment toward the laws of Jim Crow. Little did they know, their act of spontaneous defiance would galvanize the first national mass student movement. "I applauded [the Greensboro sit-ins]," Lawson would later joke, "but... [we] should have started it earlier in Nashville, because we were ready by that time" (Eyes on the Prize, Episode 3).

Although the Greensboro sit-ins had been disbanded temporarily by city officials and administrators from North Carolina A&T, students at nearby African American colleges quickly jumped on the opportunity to form their own sit-in demonstrations. On Monday, February 8th students in Winston Salem conducted their first sit-in. That same day, students from Duke University and North Carolina College staged a sit-in at the local Woolworth's. On Wednesday, students from Raleigh decided to demonstrate because they had heard a radio broadcast that no demonstrations would be conducted in the area. By the end of February, sit-ins had expanded beyond North Carolina to Charlotte, Fayetteville, High Point, Elizabeth City, Concord, and Atlanta (Carson 9). While the number of sit-in demonstrations increased rapidly and attracted media attention throughout the nation following the Greensboro sit-ins, these subsequent demonstrations were loosely connected and lacked strategic coordination.

Most of the demonstrations that followed Greensboro adhered to the principles of nonviolence. Yet many instances of violence between demonstrators and agitators did occur. For example, the Portsmouth High School demonstrations struggled to accept nonviolent principles and to maintain cohesion within the student activists. Edward Rodman, a student activist there, recalled a “swelling, pushing mob of white and Negro students, news-photographers, T.V. cameras and only two policemen.” (Rodman, News Article). In the aftermath of the violent outbreak, Rodman was contacted by Gordon Carey, a field secretary of CORE. The students began to attend CORE workshops on nonviolence, where eventually an adult committee was organized to support the students’ efforts. Although the violent outbreaks in Portsmouth represent a group of high school students rather than college students, it emphasizes how challenging it was to resist violent self-defense in moments of agitation. Moreover, the sit-in demonstrations in Portsmouth illustrate the tendency of adults to intervene

on the movement. Gordon Carey acted to unify the student activists under the nonviolent technique. However, by organizing student workshops under CORE's supervision, Carey simultaneously broke the student's autonomy and, therefore, aligned the movement under CORE's philosophy.

The Portsmouth sit-ins represent but one demonstration which struggled to suppress violent outbreaks and to maintain the control of the movement under student leadership. A reporter from Chattanooga, Tennessee wrote, "The streets of our town were not the same familiar, dingy but well-loved streets Wednesday.... Wednesday afternoon they were alien. They were frightening and saddening..., a mass of humanity, white and negro alike [swarming] up like locusts" (Peck, "'God Help Us,' A Woman Cries"). Ultimately, racial tensions in Chattanooga led to local school administrators to "do everything in [their] power" to prevent students from demonstrating (Harris 32).

Events also turned violent in Columbia, South Carolina after a group of white agitators burned a cross near two African American colleges, Allen University and Benedict College, in response to sit-in demonstrations there. Approximately fifty college students who had participated in the sit-in demonstrations destroyed several car windows at a local "whites-only" drive in restaurant. John McCray, an adult activist and editor of a local African American newspaper, criticized the movement for being unorganized and implied that black adults were actually the force behind the student protests (Myers 163). In short, the environment surrounding the sit-in movement was fractured amongst students and adults alike. Students struggled to accept nonviolence fully and, in some instances, reverted to violent resistance, while adults attempted to exert their control over the students' protests.

In Atlanta students made a considerable impact on the city's social structure. These students adhered to the movement's nonviolent philosophy and, consequently, pressured the city officials to desegregate the lunch counters. However, while the Atlanta sit-ins adhered to nonviolent tactics, they did not place Christian love at the center of the movement's philosophy. Instead, the Atlanta student activists conducted sit-ins to expose the city's economic dependence on the African American community to gain political and social equality. Specifically, the Atlanta students formed the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR), which stated the students "have joined [their] hearts, minds, and bodies in the cause of gaining those rights which are inherently ours as members of the human race and as citizens of the United States" (Appeal for Human Rights, Document). The COAHR denounced the numerous inequalities African Americans experienced in education, housing, voting, employment, etc. and employed the sit-ins to "bankrupt the economy of segregation" (Tuck 113).

While the Atlanta students utilized the sit-ins as a platform to enact widespread social change throughout the city, Lawson's students believed that Christian love empowered the sit-in movement. Ultimately, Lawson's leadership, workshops, and training allowed his pupils to remain nonviolent in the face of white aggression and to accept Christian love in its fullest form. As Lawson had learned to allow Gandhian nonviolence and Christian love to permeate all aspects of his life, so too did his students. Therefore, when the Greensboro four began the sit-in movement, the Nashville students were not surprised. Instead they were eager to begin their protests, feeling that they had been one-upped by the Greensboro students. However, news of bomb scares and Klansmen in Greensboro made the Nashville adults hesitate. Many adults debated with Lawson that it would be wise to postpone the sit-ins in Nashville (Lewis 93). Yet

the students had already made up their minds. The first wave of students sat down in the segregated Nashville lunch counters on Saturday February 13, 1960.

The Nashville protests started peaceful. Occasionally racial slurs were directed at the students, but they were not greeted with violence. Instead, Diane Nash remembers the humor in her first experience as a sit-in demonstrator. “The first sit-in we had was really funny because the waitresses were nervous and they must have dropped \$2,000 worth of dishes that day,” Nash recalled. “It was really funny, and we were sitting there trying not to laugh because we thought it would be insulting” (Diane Nash, PBS Interview). Eventually, the store owners began to launch their counterattack. Managers at the stores ordered their employees to stack wastebaskets, blankets, and lampshades on the counters to prevent the students from continuing their demonstrations (Lewis 98). The tension was rising.

Finally, the tension broke. On February 27, 1960, now known as “Big Saturday,” black and white demonstrators were vilified and beaten by white citizens as they sat at the counters of various Nashville department stores. In total, fifty-one protesters were arrested and convicted of loitering, including Jim Bevel and Diane Nash (Halberstam 141). One television camera crew was filming the violence in Mclellan’s. Paul LaPrad, a white demonstrator, particularly attracted attention from the increasingly aggressive white crowd. LaPrad was knocked off his stool, kicked and beaten on the floor by a mob of white men with the word “Chattanooga” on their jackets – referring to the recent white-on-black violence resulting from the Chattanooga sit-in demonstration (Lewis 100). When the footage aired on television that night it was the first time many Americans were confronted with the brutal, racial animosity that still existed in America. The Nashville students soon became heroes within the student led demonstrations. They become the symbol of the national sit-in movement.

However, it was not easy for every Nashville participant to accept Lawson's irrevocable adherence to nonviolence. Especially when they were confronted with violence on February, 27th. Before Big Saturday, John Lewis was aware that white agitators would attempt to disrupt their protest and doubted his ability to remain completely nonviolent. "But doubt lingers," Lewis stated, "[no matter] how many times you sit-in, or march, or in any way put yourself in the path of those who might do you harm... you can never become complacent" (Lewis 94). Yet Lewis fell back on one of Lawson's key messages, which re-inspired his faith in nonviolent resistance. "It was not enough to resist the urge to strike back at an assailant. 'That urge can't be there,' [Lawson] would tell [him], 'You have to do more than just not hit back.... You have to love the person who is hitting you'" (Cohen 163). Rooting themselves in Christian love, regardless of the hate from white antagonists, would lead many of the Nashville protesters to overcome their innate desire to fight back.

Similarly, Bernard Lafayette doubted if he was truly nonviolent. Lawson and the Bible had both taught him to turn the other cheek; however, he questioned if he would be able to fight the instinct to lash back at his attackers. Could he sacrifice his body -- his masculinity -- for the ideals of nonviolence? During the sit-in demonstration, Lafayette saw one of his fellow protesters knocked down by a white man. Lawson arrived to divert the white man's attention. When the man saw Lawson, he was enraged by his coolness, his calmness and he spat on him. Instead of fighting back or becoming angered, Lawson asked the man for a handkerchief. The white man, stunned, reached into his jacket and handed a handkerchief to Lawson. Next, to Bernard Lafayette's amazement, Lawson launched into a conversation with the man regarding motorcycles. From that moment on, Lafayette understood the value in the Lawson's teachings. He understood that regardless of what another person thought or how another person harmed

you, it only mattered that you do the right thing. He witnessed Lawson, first hand, act on the principles of Christian love and the power it had maintained over the white agitator (Halberstam 223).

Even though Lawson remained behind the scenes while the demonstrations were occurring, the *Nashville Banner*, Nashville's anti-integrationist newspaper, published diatribes against James Lawson, calling him a "flannel-mouthed agitator" communist and claimed the sit-ins were an "invitation to anarchy" (Zinn 28). The Vanderbilt administration was frightened by these articles, especially because the articles portrayed Lawson as using Vanderbilt's facilities to cover up his supposed nefarious political activities. Consequently, Vanderbilt's all white executive board expelled Lawson from the Vanderbilt Divinity School, a mere three months shy of earning his degree.

Lawson's students separated themselves from other students participating in sit-ins throughout the country. Diane Nash, Marion Barry, John Lewis, and James Bevel rooted themselves in the philosophy of nonviolence and were willing to go to jail. While other student demonstrations reverted to violence, the Nashville group was prepared and adopted Christian nonviolence as a way of life. Diane Nash would later state, "The movement had a way of reaching inside of me and bringing out [things] like courage, and love for people" (Eyes on the Prize, Episode 3). In addition, while Lawson, an adult, spent considerable time preparing the students for the sit in demonstrations, he took an auxiliary role while the demonstrations occurred. Lawson was there for the students when they required guidance or had questions, but he made sure the leadership of the movement remained within the students.

Overall, student sit-in demonstrations rose throughout the country following the Greensboro demonstrations. However, as evidenced by the student movements in Portsmouth,

Chattanooga, and Columbia, many of the student activists were at best loosely committed to principles of nonviolent technique and at worst moved to violent reprisals. In addition, these student movements also faced external influences from adult activists who either attempted to align the student's vision under traditional civil rights organizations or to prevent the students from demonstrating altogether. Thus, while the demonstrations were aligned under a common strategy – sit-in demonstrations – the movement in February 1960 lacked a well-defined vision and underlying philosophy. Moreover, while the students in Atlanta adhered to the nonviolent tactic, nonviolence resistance, first and foremost, provided the students with a platform to resist a range of social inequities that African Americans experienced, including the city's economic dependence on the African American community. In short, the student sit in movement was largely disorganized and imperfectly committed to the concept of Christian love and nonviolence. Only James Lawson's students were truly principled on the concepts of nonviolence and understood how important it was to accept Christian, unconditional love as a way of life rather than exclusively as a strategy. This disarrayed, unorganized environment ultimately prompted Ella Baker, then executive director the SCLC, to organize a national student meeting at Shaw University.

IV. Ella Baker Constructs the Shaw Conference

All of these sit-in demonstrations and the lack of coordination between them certainly did not escape the notice of Ella Baker. Baker was a veteran civil rights activist affiliated with the NAACP who had taken on a leadership role with the new Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Baker understood the importance of mass action within the Civil Rights movement and; therefore, decided to attempt to resolve the

differences between existing student demonstrations and bring the students under the commitment to nonviolence by organizing a conference at her alma mater, Shaw University in Raleigh. However, developing the intended role of the Shaw conference was certainly not easy. Baker was critical of traditional civil rights organizations, including the SCLC. Specifically, she and Martin Luther King Jr. had conflicting opinions regarding how the newly formed student organization should operate. In effect, the historical context leading up to the Shaw conference underscore the conflicting civil rights philosophies that Ella Baker had to navigate in order to help establish a coherent student-led organization under the principles of nonviolent direct action.

Following the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Ella Baker recognized that mass action – similar to efforts of the Montgomery Bus Boycott – could further the aims of the Civil Rights Movement. But what was the best way to maintain the momentum mass action had sustained on the Civil Rights landscape? Although Baker had worked within the NAACP during the 1940s, she perceived the organization as primarily concerned with “legal action” and lacking a focus on organizing mass action that lent itself to demonstration. Similarly, Baker questioned whether the SCLC -- the very organization she served as executive director during the sit-ins -- could sustain a national mass action movement. Particularly, Baker believed that the SCLC’s power resided within Southern ministers who were not accustomed to mass action. Rather she believed that the ministerial governance of the SCLC was ill-equipped to cultivate a movement around mass action, a concept that went “against the grain” of the traditional Civil Rights philosophy (Ella Baker Interview, 4 September 1974).

Baker’s prediction proved correct. After the Montgomery Bus Boycott, she recalled a complete let down in mass action. People complained that the SCLC lacked the organizational

machinery to make use of the people involved in the Boycott (Ella Baker Interview, 4 September 1974). Instinctively, Baker turned her focus towards the people who had been directly involved and vitalized the Montgomery Bus Boycott: youth and women. She was critical of the “masculine and ministerial ego” that prevented organizations such as the NAACP, CORE, and the SCLC from having women broadly represented within leading civil right organizations. After all, she believed, women were the ones who kept the spirit of the Montgomery Bus Boycott going. In terms of youth involvement, Baker intuitively knew that young people would be the hope of sustaining any form of movement guided by a philosophy of mass action. Consequently, when the sit-in movement began in February 1960, she was unsurprised by the student enthusiasm and dedication. Rather, she was only caught off guard by the speed with which the sit-ins escalated and spread throughout the country. And, despite the fact that the sit-ins attracted widespread media attention, Baker realized that no “real coordination or even exchange [was] taking place between the groups that were [sitting-in]” (Ella Baker Interview, 5 May 1972). In many respects, the start of the sit-in movement confirmed her belief that mass action could push the Civil Rights Movement’s agenda to the forefront of national media attention. Therefore, having secured an eight-hundred-dollar donation from the SCLC, Baker sought to create a student conference to assist the students in aligning their movement under a consistent ideology and creating a sustainable communication network between students who participated in demonstrations.

However, although Baker had a clear vision that student mass action could advance the civil rights movement’s agenda, she experienced multiple challenges as she organized the conference. The conference was anything but a spontaneous meeting organized in a haphazard manner. Baker had her own political aspirations and sought to influence the identity of the

student-run organization that would become SNCC. First and foremost, Baker believed the student movement leadership should be retained within student leadership. She had to navigate pressures from Martin Luther King Jr. who intimated that the student movement should become an auxiliary branch of the SCLC. In addition, Baker sought to assist the student leaders to accept an organizational structure that diffused leadership responsibilities rather than the traditional civil rights movement's executive leadership model. To resolve these issues, Baker turned to James Lawson to transfer these philosophies to the students.

It is important to note that Ella Baker was not a zealous supporter of nonviolent resistance. "Mine was not a choice of nonviolence versus the other," she stated. "Mine was in terms of the knowledge of history that I at least had the recognition that where their strength would ultimately lie would be involving people in mass [protest]... not one fighting for nonviolence" (Ella Baker Interview, 4 September 1974). One month before the Shaw conference, Baker conducted surveys with hundreds of student leaders to gain a better understanding of the students' overall underlying philosophy and wrote a ten-page report about her findings (Ransby 262). In which, she expressed that in order to keep the spirits going among the students there needed to be some form of co-ordination and direction to keep them from reverting to violence. Baker recognized that the Nashville group was the most indoctrinated in the philosophy of nonviolent resistance. Moreover, she knew that the Nashville students commanded respect and the credentials among the student population for the courage they displayed on national television during their sit-in demonstration. For example, Hank Thomas, a student activist from Howard University who attended the Shaw Conference, had always thought of the Nashville delegation as the "Nashville All-Stars, cool, suave, with a certain deft but clearly discernable swagger" (Halberstam 337). Thus, Baker turned to James Lawson as the keynote

speaker for the conference because he effectively empowered the Nashville students through a nonviolent philosophy. Baker had not always been an advocate for nonviolent direct action; however, she saw Lawson's nonviolent philosophy as a means to integrate *mass action* into the core of the student sit-in movement.

Furthermore, Baker recognized the need to assist the students in constructing the organization's leadership model. In particular, Baker wanted the student run organization to diverge from the SCLC's more traditional leadership model. She saw a problem with Martin Luther King Jr. adopting a "Moses-type" position in the Civil Rights movement. "Instead of trying to develop people around a leader, the thrust... should be that the first consideration is to try to develop leadership out of the group and spread leadership roles...so that you're organizing people to be self- sufficient rather than dependent upon [a] charismatic leader" (Ella Baker Interview, 19 June 1968). It is unclear whether Baker was aware of Lawson's similar concept of organizational leadership. In his Nashville workshops, Lawson advocated against hierarchical leadership and sought to develop leadership qualities within each activist. Therefore, Baker made a shrewd decision to choose Lawson as a keynote speaker in order to translate her perception of leadership development to the student activists.

In addition, Baker was faced with the struggle to determine the SCLC's role in the formation of a student-run organization. While Baker intended to have the student organization operate as an autonomous entity, Martin Luther King Jr. had hoped the student's would operate as a branch of the SCLC. Particularly, King was under pressure from certain SCLC advisors to gain control over the sit-in movement (Garrow 132-33). Yet on March 16, approximately one month before the conference, Baker convinced Doug Moore, a minister from Durham, and Rev. Glenn Smiley, a white civil rights official from FOR, that it would be best to allow the

students to form their own independent organization. Baker's goal to promote student autonomy was underscored in a press release that stated adult activists would take a more auxiliary role, strictly attending for "counsel and guidance" purposes (James Lawson, Press Release). Clearly, Baker intended to indicate that as the sit-in movement had been adopted by student leadership, the future leadership should remain within the student generation.

The notion that Ella Baker had intended for the students' priorities and concerns to dictate the dialogue, rather than by adult perspectives, is further bolstered by Diane Nash and Julian Bond. Nash, reflecting on Baker's contribution to the Civil Rights movement remarked how, "[Baker] saw how important it was to recognize the fact that the students should set the goals and directions and maintain control of the student movement" (Hampton 55). In a similar vein, Bond remembered Ella Baker "warning against entanglement with adults.... She didn't say 'Don't let Martin Luther King tell you what to do,' but you got the real feeling that that's what she meant. You know, 'He's a good man and so on, but don't let him tell you what to do'" (Hampton 63). Therefore, the Shaw conference reflects the competing ideologies between two formidable Civil Rights activists: Ella Baker and Martin Luther King. Lawson faced the challenge in addressing this conflict as to whether the student's should remain independent from the SCLC or become a operating branch of the preexisting organization.

Lastly, Ella Baker's decision to nominate Lawson as a keynote speaker at the conference caused internal friction within the SCLC. Specifically, the SCLC executive committee questioned Baker's decision. The committee believed the SCLC needed to be projected more and, therefore, a more notable figure within the organization would have been a better choice (Ella Baker Interview, 19 June 1968). In addition, Baker believed that King, to a certain extent felt, threatened by Lawson. After all, Lawson had an outspoken personality and advocated a

Civil Rights tactic, direct action, that had not yet been fully accepted by King and the SCLC. “[King] was not sufficiently secure,” according to Baker, “I think, to feel that he could exist and they could exist without feeling that they were competitive threats” (Ella Baker Interview, 4 September 1974). Ultimately, Baker won out because she convinced the committee to understand the considerable role Lawson played in rallying the Nashville movement behind the principles of nonviolent direct action and Christian love.

Overall, it is important to note the considerable influence that Ella Baker played in constructing the Shaw University conference. The conference was not prepared in a spontaneous instant, similar to how the sit-in movement spread across the country. Rather, Baker was methodical and prepared to help guide the students to create an umbrella organization where students could coordinate national movements. She faced push back from Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC’s committee. She had to consider how the students would set up their organizational leadership structure. Ultimately, Baker chose James Lawson to deliver the keynote event because of his leadership experience and role he played in the Nashville movement and she believed he was best suited to address the challenges that the students would bring with them to Shaw.

Chapter 3

Analysis of Lawson's Speech at Shaw University

As the students sang "We Shall Overcome" on the night of April 15th, they did not have a clear sense of what they were overcoming. The students had arrived at Shaw, unified by the impromptu and imperfectly coordinated sit-in movement. In addition, the sit-in movement had awoken a student generation who had been politically inactive for most of their lives. They were acquainted with the Civil Rights Movement, but they were unaware of the political divide that their nonviolent, mass action movement had caused between leading civil rights strategists and organizations. As James Lawson approached the stage that night, he was aware of the situation's magnitude. What he would say to the students would ultimately influence the structure and mission of the first student-led civil rights organization.

Lawson began the speech by defining what the student sit-in movement was not. It was not about his expulsion from Vanderbilt; it was not about police partiality of violence from white agitators; it was not about reforming national law; it was not about integration; and it was not about the right to buy a "hamburger" from a segregated lunch counter. Instead, Lawson described that the sit-in movement had much larger goals. The movement was about living a life of Christian love in order to "break down" racial barriers to redeem a national community that "recognizes no barriers dividing humanity." Having established the movement under the banner of Christian love and nonviolence, Lawson moved on to explain the movement had two intended purposes. First, the movement intended to underscore the moral and spiritual dimensions of America's racial problem. Second, the movement demanded continual prompt action. Towards

the end of the speech Lawson became critical of the NAACP and the black church. Lawson criticized the NAACP's focus on fundraising and the black church's attempt to secure power rather than "redeem society." Lawson closed the speech with a declaration that only a "radical Christian" philosophy founded in love and nonviolence could "transform [the] evil" of segregation in America.

Overall, the student sit-in movement had grown sporadically, unorganized, and without a sense of direction from the student protestors themselves. Also, protestors' commitment to nonviolent resistance became fragile as militancy in the white community became more frequent. Lawson recognized the challenge and necessity to convince the students to maintain their dedication to the sit-in movement, to umbrella their demonstrations under a common goal for all communities that had implemented sit-in demonstrations, and to maintain Christian nonviolent resistance. To accomplish these goals, Lawson referenced the situational context surrounding African American college students in the 1960s throughout his speech, criticized the strategies of pre-existing civil rights organizations, and set the foundation for a student-led organization guided by a nonviolent direct action philosophy. In effect, Lawson successfully united the students who attended the Raleigh conference to continue their commitment to the nonviolent sit-in demonstrations and form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

I. Reaffirming the Students' Commitment to Sit-Ins

The first challenge Lawson had to overcome was to convince the students at Shaw to continue as civil rights activists and that the sit-in demonstrations were the optimal strategy to advance the student Civil Rights Movement's agenda. Specifically, Lawson had to recognize that these students were, in fact, young people, many of whom foresaw professional careers that did not involve civil rights activism. For example, Julian Bond created a student-run literary

magazine and participated in an internship with *Time* magazine. How would Lawson convince students like Bond to put their career paths on hold and to sustain their commitment to the sit-in demonstrations? In addition, the students who had come to Shaw had minimal, if any, experience as civil rights activists prior to the sit-ins. “I remember thinking, I’m only twenty-two years old,” Diane Nash recalled. “We were coming up against governors of seven states, judges, politicians, [and businessmen]” (*Eyes on the Prize*, Episode 3). How would Lawson motivate the students to continue their commitment to the sit-ins despite the formidable political rivals and white antagonists who would attempt to stop them? To overcome these challenges, Lawson had to debunk the adult notion that the student generation was unprepared to take leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. In addition, Lawson asserted that the scope of the sit-in demonstrations represented something much deeper than obtaining civil rights: it represented a “moral and spiritual” issue that American society needed to address. Furthermore, Lawson used powerful diction and referenced the African Civil Rights Movement to reaffirm the students’ commitment to civil rights activism.

First, Lawson had to invalidate the adult argument that the student generation was ill-equipped to assume leadership roles in the Civil Rights Movement. Adult activists and college administrators, who largely advocated for forms of respectability politics, questioned the underlying potential of the sit-ins given that many of the students had minimal experience as civil rights activists. For example, many college administrators criticized the sit-in demonstrations for crossing the boundary of “proper” behavior and reassured the white population that the sit-ins would be a transient movement (Turner 79). Because adult activists largely controlled the national civil rights discourse, Lawson recognized that he needed to invalidate their argument and to emphasize the sit-in movement’s potential. “Reflect how over

the last few weeks, the ‘sit-in’ movement has leaped from campus to campus,” Lawson stated, “until today hardly any campus remains unaffected.” Lawson evoked the inherent potential of the sit-in demonstrations by asking the students to “reflect” on the movement that had spread across the country in a mere “few weeks.” In conjunction, Lawson discredited the hasty generalization largely used by adults that the sit-in movement represented something no more than “another student fad similar to a pantry raid.” Instead, Lawson instilled a renewed confidence in the capacity of the sit-in demonstrations to address national civil rights issues despite the push back from adult activists.

Second, Lawson incorporated powerful diction into his speech to motivate the students to continue their demonstrations. Lawson glorified the student movement by emphasizing how the students were “audacious enough to dare the intimidations and violence of racial injustice, a witness not to be matched by any social effort... of the nation.” Here, Lawson implied that despite the victories that long-standing civil rights organizations had accomplished – *Brown vs. Board of Education* and the Montgomery Bus Boycott – the sit-in demonstrations represented the most important “social effort” in the history of civil rights strategies. In effect, Lawson motivated the students to reaffirm their commitment to the sit-in movement because of its significant impact on the national Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, Lawson’s decision to use powerful words such as “audacious,” “intimidations,” and “violence” amplified the breadth of the students’ bravery. Similarly, Lawson allowed the students to appreciate and to understand their movement’s vitality in continuing the Civil Rights Movement’s progress and inspired them to continue representing such bravery in future sit-in demonstrations.

Third, Lawson used spiritual language in conjunction with strong diction to suggest to the students that the sit-in movement represented something much deeper than a fight to obtain civil

liberties. “Until America (South and North) honestly accepts the sinful nature of racism,” Lawson stated, “this cancerous disease will continue to rape all of us.” Lawson’s decision to use “rape” had a very powerful effect. It emphasized the seriousness of the issue at hand and the urgency required by the students at Shaw to reconfirm their commitment to the sit-in movement. Moreover, Lawson’s decision to say “sinful nature of racism” suggested to the students that the sit-in movement evoked a moral issue (rather than an exclusively political issue) that the American society had to address. As Lawson stated, this “sinful nature of racism” surfaced when “A city like Nashville [which had] acquired national fame about its progression in desegregation [yet] when the ‘sit-ins’ began the underlying hatred and sin burst onto the surface.” Consequently, Lawson motivated the students at Shaw to confirm their commitment to the sit-ins by suggesting that joining the movement meant to be a part of something larger than the Civil Rights Movement.

In particular, Lawson expressed that the sit-in movement’s scope extended beyond the traditional civil rights goal to obtain civil liberties and into the realm of spirituality and morality. “The Christian favors the breaking down of racial barriers,” Lawson stated, “because the redeemed community of which he is already a citizen recognizes no barriers dividing humanity.” The implication in Lawson’s statement is that the students are the “redeemers” who maintain the potential – through the sit-in demonstrations – to break down “racial barriers” and allow the American society to recognize that “no barriers [divide] humanity.” In doing so, Lawson instilled a sense of moral superiority into the students. This moral superiority motivated the students to reaffirm their commitment to the sit-in movement because it not only suggested that the demonstrations would alter the American social structure, but also alter the core values in American society. Essentially, Lawson motivated the students at Shaw University to

reconfirm their commitment to the sit-in demonstrations because it provided them with a “moral” imperative to continue the demonstrations and alter American values.

In a similar way, Lawson referenced the African Civil Rights Movement to suggest to the students that participation in the sit-in movement meant joining something larger than America’s Civil Rights Movement. “The pace of social change is too slow,” Lawson explained. “All of Africa will be free before the American Negro.” Here, Lawson touched upon how African-American college students were envious and vaguely moved by the African independence movement (Carson 15). By touching on the international context, Lawson linked the students’ sit-in movement to international developments. Consequently, Lawson suggested that participation in the sit-in movement meant becoming part of something larger than the American civil rights struggle. Therefore, Lawson motivated the students to reaffirm their commitment to the sit-ins because they recognized how their movement contributed to the international context of civil rights.

It is important to note that Lawson does not tell the students that commitment to the sit-ins would require many students to put their professional careers on hold. This observation makes sense given that Lawson wanted the students to make their own decisions free of adult intervention. However, as evidenced, Lawson encouraged the students at Shaw to accept leadership roles within the Civil Rights Movement and encouraged them to adhere to the sit-in method through the use of powerful diction and spiritual language. “The matter is not legal, sociological, or racial,” Lawson stated, “it is moral and spiritual.” Overall, Lawson’s diction glorified the students’ sit-in demonstrations and stressed their immediate need to continue sit-in demonstrations. Ultimately, Lawson motivated the students to reaffirm their commitment to the sit-in movement by extending the breadth of the student movement to something that is much

deeper than obtaining civil liberties. The sit-ins provided the students with a moral advantage to restructure the core values of American society. Lawson made the students aware of the moral implications of the sit-in movement and how it extended to the international fight for civil rights.

II. Defining the Student Movement Under Philosophy of Christian Nonviolence

Lawson also had to overcome the challenge of uniting the student movement under the principles of Christian nonviolence. Specifically, the sit-in movement had spread across the country without any real coordination between student leaders regarding the movement's underlying motivations and values. While most sit-ins were nonviolent, the demonstrations in Columbia, South Carolina and Chattanooga, Tennessee represented instances where protests devolved to violence. Moreover, while the Atlanta sit-in movement was intended to exploit the local economy's dependence on the African American community, the Nashville student movement was based on the principles of Christian love. Essentially, the national student movement was organized around the sit-in method; however, the overarching message and the underlying values of the sit-ins remained obscure. "Amid this welter of irrelevant and superficial reactions," Lawson stated, "the primary motifs of the movement, the essential message, the crucial issue raised are often completely missed." In effect, Lawson faced the challenge of unraveling the competing philosophies between sit-in demonstrations and uniting the movement under the principle of Christian nonviolence. It is also important to note that Lawson spent over a year indoctrinating his students in the philosophy of Christian nonviolence. Therefore, Lawson faced the formidable challenge of motivating the assembly of students at Shaw University – many of whom had minimal training in nonviolent resistance – to create a student-led organization under the banner of Christian nonviolence. To overcome these challenges, Lawson had to first debunk the notion that the sit-in's ultimate goal was to exploit local economies. In

doing so, Lawson suggested these motives were superficial in nature and merely scratched the surface of the movement's roots based in Christian nonviolence.

First, Lawson debunked the misconception that the sit-in movement intended to exploit local economies' dependence on the African American community. Lawson evoked this notion when he stated, "Many merchants [are] zealously smothering their Negro customer with courtesy for normal services." Undoubtedly, the sit-ins were not a one-dimensional act of civil disobedience. Many of the student sit-in movements, including Nashville, were successful, in part, because they exploited their community's economic dependence on the African-American community. For example, Vivian Henderson, an economist from Fisk University, estimated that African Americans constituted approximately 17% of overall total sales and that downtown stores lost around \$250,000 in March as a result of the Nashville sit-ins (Halberstam 178). These statistics from sit-in demonstrations are admirable; however, Lawson asserted the merchants' response to offer superficial courtesy only served to perpetuate the spurious notion that "We have good race relations [in America]." Therefore, Lawson suggested that the underlying value of the sit-in demonstrations extended beyond the economic realm.

After establishing that the sit-in's underlying purpose was not to exploit local economies, Lawson was able to outline the importance of uniting the movement under Christian nonviolence. Students activists, including a few of Lawson's students, doubted their ability to remain nonviolent as local police officers allowed white agitators to slander and to attack sit-in demonstrators. Thus, Lawson had to convince the students to remain nonviolent despite the fact that they would be putting their bodies at risk. In particular, Lawson created a powerful metaphor between lynching and segregation in order to stress the urgency by which the students at Shaw must adopt a consistently nonviolent approach. Furthermore, Lawson explained that

police permissiveness would be inevitable; the students' bodies would be susceptible to verbal and physical assault. However, through nonviolence, Lawson instilled a sense of moral superiority in the students to confront the "inevitable" white agitators.

Specifically, Lawson created a metaphor between lynching and the sit-ins in order to maintain the student's commitment to nonviolence. "Lynching has virtually disappeared... but the real lynching continues unabated," Lawson stated. "The lynching of souls, persons (white and Negro) violating its victims absolutely, stripping them of human traits." In this instance, Lawson established the movement's connection to Christianity and nonviolence. Lawson expressed that the movement's purpose extended beyond the physical realm and into the spiritual realm of Christian "souls." Moreover, although lynching reminded the students of brutal violence against black bodies, Lawson suggested that the "real" lynching threatened to destroy persons' souls (white and black) as a result of segregation. This metaphor required the students at Shaw to recognize the sit-in movement extended beyond the physical body and addressed the much larger issue of violence against one's soul. It is also essential to note that Lawson included the lynching of both "white and Negro" souls. In effect, Lawson did not justify violence in any capacity. Rather, the metaphor indirectly suggested that the nonviolent method must be adopted given that violence, in any form, perpetuated the destruction of both white and African American souls. In addition, Lawson stated that this spiritual lynching continued, "every day even while [the students] make believe that lynching is a phenomenon of the past" in order to express the urgency by which the students must adopt a nonviolent method. Thus, Lawson created a powerful metaphor between lynching and segregation to emphasize the need for the students at Shaw to adopt a nonviolent philosophy.

Next, Lawson had to remove the doubt among the students at Shaw University that they could remain truly nonviolent in the face of white agitators. Specifically, the students were aware that many local police departments would not prevent white agitators from attempting to disrupt the students' peaceful protests. The local police represented the only shield that could protect the demonstrators from white agitators. Therefore, police permissiveness made the students feel vulnerable and, in many instances, question their ability to remain truly nonviolent. In particular, Bernard Lafayette -- one of Lawson's students -- had remained nonviolent during the Nashville sit-ins. However, he seriously doubted his ability to do so. Specifically, Lafayette questioned if he would be able to rise above the taunts of his adversaries and resist the innate "instinct to lash back at his attackers" (Halberstam 136). Therefore, Lawson had to convince the students to accept the verbal and physical violence that would result from police permissiveness.

First, Lawson empathized with the students' situation in order to develop a sense of trust. Lawson recognized the negative implications that police permissiveness maintained on the student protesters' physical well-being: "Police permissiveness invited young white men to take over store after store in an effort to further intimidate or crush the 'sit-in.'" Despite the fact that students had been beaten and slandered, Lawson noted that police were "unable to even suspect and certainly not to see assault and battery." It would have been easy for Lawson to ramble about the ideals and philosophy of Christian nonviolence. However, to do so would have ignored the physical reality that participating in sit-in demonstrations meant to put yourself in the line of physical and verbal abuse. Thus, Lawson empathized with the student's' situation before he expressed the importance of remaining nonviolent.

In particular, Lawson motivated the students to accept a nonviolent philosophy by expressing how police permissiveness paled in comparison to the larger scope of the sit-in movement. “Police of the nation have always wreaked brutality upon minority groups,” Lawson stated. “[However,] we hold nothing against these hard-pressed officers.” Lawson did not justify police permissiveness. On the other hand, he allowed the students to recognize that police partiality was an “inevitable” result of any minority group’s social movement. Thus, Lawson allowed the students to realize that social movements before them had to endure physical and verbal pain as well. Lawson inflated the significance of the student movement by placing it in the historical context of social rights movements. Moreover, Lawson did not downplay the physical toll the sit-ins would maintain on the students’ bodies. He explicitly stated that police permissiveness was “inevitable,” implying that students would have to be willing to put their bodies on the line and to be strong enough to deflect taunts and physical abuse from white agitators. He recognized the physical pain many demonstrators will endure from the sit-ins; however, he does not include any language to suggest he doubted the students’ ability to adhere to nonviolence. Rather, Lawson stated the “nonviolent movement is asserting, ‘get moving. The pace of social change is too slow.’” Therefore, Lawson implied to the students that, as Christ suffered, they too were similarly tasked to endure the pain and sorrow of America’s racially fraught social system. In effect, Lawson motivated the students to accept the nonviolent method because it meant to become a part of much larger mission. As Jesus had carried the cross, Lawson implied it was the students’ duty to carry the burden of America’s racial caste system until society could accept Christian love and nonviolence.

Overall, Lawson successfully motivated the students to adopt a Christian nonviolent method. First, Lawson deconstructed the “superficial” notion that the sit-ins intended to exploit

local communities' dependence on the African American community. Next, he empathized with the students throughout the speech in order to develop a trusting relationship with the students. And finally, Lawson introduced two powerful metaphors to motivate the students to adopt a set of principles founded on Christian nonviolence.

III. Separating the Student Movement from Traditional Civil Rights Activists

The final challenge Lawson faced during his speech at Shaw University was to develop a student-led organization that separated themselves from adult activists and traditional civil rights organizations. Specifically, Ella Baker wanted the students to operate autonomously from adults, while Martin Luther King Jr. was under pressure from his executive council to influence the student organization to become an auxiliary branch of the SCLC. Would the student organization act as auxiliary branch of the SCLC or would it act autonomously? Would the student organization adopt a legal strategy to advance the Civil Rights Movement or would it advocate for mass action? Many adult activists and organizations such as the NAACP were unsettled by the directness of the sit-ins. They believed the students were ill-prepared for leadership roles within the movement given that most of the students had little, if any, experience as social activists. Moreover, many adult activists, who largely advocated for a form of respectability politics through the legal system, questioned the students' "jail, not bail" policy. Therefore, Lawson's speech had to separate the student movement from adult activists as a new radically Christian, nonviolent method to obtain social justice. In addition, Lawson implied that the student organization should incorporate a diffused leadership style rather than the traditional civil rights organization's hierarchical structure. To accomplish these goals,

Lawson used language that mocked adult activists and made traditional civil rights organizations appear ineffectual compared to the student generation's sit-in movement.

First, Lawson mocked the adult perception of the student population in order to create a divide between the student-led organization and adult activists. "At the beginning of this decade [1960s], the student generation was 'silent,' 'uncommitted,' or 'beatnik,'" Lawson noted. "But after only four months, these analogies largely used by adults appear as hasty clichés." Prior to the 1960s, the public's perception of black college students' involvement in the Civil Rights movement was painted by E. Franklin Frazier's book, *Black Bourgeoisie*. Frazier stated that the African American college student was politically apathetic and motivated by conventional, middle-class values. Lawson's statement allowed the student audience to reflect on the accomplishments that the sit-in movement had acquired in a short period of time. However, the statement also created a divide between adults and the student generation. Essentially, Lawson's assertion implied that adults were incapable of grasping the potential of the national student movement. Consequently, Lawson construed the adult generation as ineffective to control the deliberation of the Civil Rights Movement and indirectly suggested that the students should operate as an autonomous organization.

Lawson further expressed that the student-run organization should operate without adult intervention by referencing his expulsion from Vanderbilt. "Many people of good-will... have considered my expulsion from Vanderbilt University... as the focus of attention," Lawson stated. "But nothing could be further from the truth." Rather, Lawson stated that this misconception illustrated "an ancient way of escaping an existential moment. Call him the 'son of the devil,' or one of the 'men who turn the world upside down,' and there are always the gullible who will 'swallow the camel.'" In particular, the student population – in general – believed that they had

continually subverted their autonomy to adult-run civil rights organizations. For example, Julian Bond stated that “because King and his people were so powerful and so dominant, we had never truly taken over our own movement. We were essentially subservient to the older generation” (Halberstam 216). Because Lawson represented an “adult” figure, he recognized the need to remove himself from the focus of the movement. In effect, Lawson mitigated the underlying student anxiety that he was simply there to convince the students to become part of the larger “adult” Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, it is important to note that Lawson’s language implied that the sit-in movement’s power resided in the individuals, rather than a singular leader. In this way, Lawson constructed the notion that the student organization’s structure should accept a diffused leadership model, rather than the traditional civil rights organizations’ executive leadership model.

Furthermore, Lawson used language to express how traditional civil rights organizations focus on legal maneuvers – particularly the NAACP – pale in comparison to the students’ radically Christian sit-in movement. Specifically, Lawson referenced the crisis that occurred in Little Rock, Arkansas following *Brown vs. Board of Education*. “When elements of good-will called for law and order during the crisis in Little Rock, their pleas fell on deaf ears,” Lawson stated. “In many sections of the country where law no longer sustains and enforces segregation, the segregation persists because it is etched upon the habits of mind and emotion.” At surface value, it appeared that the ultimate goal of the sit-ins was to integrate lunch counters or, in other words, to change the law. Yet Lawson maintained that the student movement was more than just generating fuss over a “hamburger.” In effect, Lawson took a subtle jab at civil rights organizations who sought to enact social justice through the courtroom. Lawson’s statement implied that social justice can only be attained when the “mind and emotion” of the American

public accepts racism's sinful nature and that legal decisions were ultimately futile at accomplishing this goal. Thus, Lawson moved on to clarify that "Law is always nullified by practice and disdain unless the minds and hearts of a people sustain law." Essentially, Lawson's reference to Little Rock acted to remind the students that obtaining civil liberties through the legislature would not remove racism from American society. Therefore, Lawson motivated the students to avoid legal strategies that traditional civil rights organizations such as the NAACP had advocated and sustain their commitment to nonviolent direct action.

While Lawson's reference to Little Rock served as an indirect jab the NAACP's tendency to enact change through laws, he also directly criticized the NAACP in order to separate the student movement from traditional civil rights organizations. "The nonviolent movement is asserting, 'get moving,'" Lawson stated. "The pace of social change is too slow." The implication of Lawson's statement was that traditional civil rights organizations change too slowly, which served two key purposes regarding the students at Shaw. First, it allowed the students to recognize that their nonviolent sit-in movement was unique compared to traditional civil rights strategies. Second, it encouraged the students to continue practicing their "nonviolent movement" in order to speed up the "pace of social change." In addition, Lawson criticized the NAACP for "[accenting] fundraising and court action rather than developing our greatest resource, a people no longer the victims of racial evil who can act in a disciplined manner." By criticizing the NAACP, Lawson highlighted how different the student movement was in comparison to traditional civil rights strategies that focused on "fundraising" and "court action" rather than mass direct action principled on Christian nonviolence. Furthermore, by denouncing traditional civil rights organizations and the NAACP -- largely adult organizations -- Lawson encouraged the students to create a movement free from adult intervention. In effect, the

students were motivated to continue their innovative nonviolent direct action strategy in order to galvanize the pace of social change.

Importantly, Lawson's criticism was not uniquely directed at civil rights organizations that advocated for legal action and fundraising. He also criticized the African American church when he stated, "The Negro church and minister function as in an earlier day and not as God's agents to redeem society." Here, Lawson implied that African American ministers sought to find political and social power rather than attempting to transform America's social values. While Lawson and King maintained a friendly relationship throughout the Civil Rights Movement, King's organization, the SCLC, was inextricably connected to the African American church community. Therefore, regardless of whether Lawson meant to indirectly attack the SCLC, the students at Shaw were encouraged to be wary of the African American church community, indirectly suggesting to the students to avoid direct affiliation with the SCLC.

Finally, it is important to note that Lawson does not explicitly reference that the students at Shaw should adopt a "jail, not bail" philosophy. Because this strategy was the source of contentious debates between adult activists, it is odd that Lawson does not directly address the issue. However, Lawson may have been confident that one of his Nashville students would assume an early leadership position in the newfound student organization. Therefore, the "jail, not bail" philosophy – a tactic he advocated in his Nashville workshops – would undoubtedly transition into the organization's mission. Instead, Lawson focused on core values that differentiated the student generation from their adult counterparts. Lawson's speech emphasized how "radically Christian values" founded in nonviolent direct action could change the civil rights landscape. Therefore, Lawson's key task was to separate the student movement from adult activists by emphasizing their differences in philosophy. In particular, Lawson used language

that emphasized how the traditional civil rights strategy to enact change through legislation was ineffectual and asserted that the student generation's movement could truly alter the "minds and emotions" of the American society.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Lawson delivered an impassioned speech that would unite the student-led movement under the philosophy of nonviolent direct action. Reflecting back on the Shaw conference, Ella Baker recalled that Lawson's speech left a greater impression on the students than Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech the following night. "Lawson had not only the eloquence to be heard but the persuasiveness of argument," Baker said. "As far as Dr. King was concerned, his speech could not have possibly had the same relevance that Lawson's did because he and not been engaged in what the students had been doing" (Ella Baker Interview, 4 September 1974). Lawson and King maintained mutual respect for one another throughout the Civil Rights Movement (Baldwin 191). However, at that conference students such as Diane Nash and James Bevel perceived that the two leaders held different opinions regarding whether the students would operate autonomously or under the supervision of the SCLC. To Lawson, King represented the traditional civil rights leadership, whereas he believed the students needed to adopt what he would call "radical Christian obedience." Consequently, Lawson addressed four challenges in his speech. First, he reaffirmed the students' commitment to the sit-in movement. Second, he united the student organization under the banner of Christian nonviolence. Third, he established the student movement's autonomy from adult activists. And finally, he underscored the students' "radically" Christian movement separated themselves traditional civil rights organizations.

On April, 27th 1960 – twelve days after Lawson's keynote address – Martin Luther King Jr. received a concerned letter from Roy Wilkins, then the NAACP's secretary, regarding the

negative statements Lawson had made during his keynote speech at Shaw University. In Wilkins letter he stated:

The Memphis NAACP Branch alone put up \$3,400 in bail; the whole Orangeburg operation was an NAACP operation with bail money being furnished by us; we arranged for bail of the last students in Baton Rouge; it was the NAACP legal defense fund which called the lawyers conference in Washington and coordinated the complicated and varied strategy of defense. (Wilkins' Letter to King, Lawson Papers)

Ironically, Wilkins' statements align with many of the criticisms that Lawson voiced regarding the NAACP. Wilkins maintained a heavy emphasis on bail (money) and legal strategies. Undoubtedly, the NAACP's legal defense fund allowed the students who participated in the sit-ins to feel an enhanced sense of security. However, the NAACP failed to recognize that the profound influence of the student sit-ins lay in the student's ability to accept mass, nonviolent direct action in order to confront "racial sin." Overall, Lawson played a pivotal role in rallying the student generation under the principles of Christian nonviolence to form the first student-led organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

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