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Making a Better World: African-Americans, Voting the Christian Message

A Commentary by Jason Curry



The Reverend Dr. Jason Richard Curry is Dean of the Fisk Memorial Chapel at Fisk University. He can be reached at jcurry@fisk.edu or www.fiskmemorialchapel.com.

Recently, I had the pleasure of introducing my students to the concept of non-violent, civil disobedience. We were reading The Letter from the Birmingham Jail by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and I decided to show a video clip from the movie titled "Eyes on the Prize." To my surprise, most of my students, who are between the ages of eighteen and twenty two, had never seen this important documentary which is now on YouTube. Moreover, many of them had not seen video footage which detailed the challenges associated with our historical struggle to end racial segregation in America. The entire class was absolutely captivated by Eyes on the Prize, and they had no idea that the Black Church with ministers such as the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, Reverend Wyatt T. Walker, Reverend Ralph Abernathy, the Reverend James Bevel and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. were intimately involved in matters of faith and politics. One of the hour-long, video clips of Eyes on the Prize noted

that the political involvement of African-Americans during the Civil Rights Movement necessarily and permanently changed the face of the Democratic Party. Indeed, one of the reasons African-Americans beamed with pride during Mrs. Michelle Obama's speech at the Democratic National Convention was because she embodied the success of the African-American community's quest to be recognized and celebrated within political landscaped of American life. Many of us can't wait to hear the message of hope that President Obama is sure to bring at the conclusion of the Convention.

The Black Church has always been intimately involved in the political arena of American life because the Christian message necessarily concerns the improvement of the entire person, not just his or her spiritual life. Jesus was concerned with our physical life (e.g., he healed the man with the withered hand - Matthew 12:10-13), our spiritual life (e.g., he was the Bread of Life - John 6:35) our

emotional life (e.g., he said that he will send us the Comforter - John 16:7) and our political and economic life (e.g., he said "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's..." Mark 12:17). The early church helped people who existed among the political landscape of a Roman, Greek and Jewish culture. Its focus was on meeting the needs of God's people wherever they were located along a political or economic continuum.

Eyes on the Prize details the African-American struggle for equality during the Civil Rights Movement. Given the sacrifices of African-Americans such as Fannie Lou Hamer, African-Americans in general and African-American Christians in particular have a responsibility to exercise their right to vote in this forthcoming presidential election. Let us remember to exercise this right and encourage others to do so this November.