The Role of the African American Church in the Civil Rights Movement

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Description

Professor Manning Marabel discusses African American ministers, their congregations, and the roles they played during the fight for civil rights.

Keywords

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Transcript
The Role of the African American Church in the Civil Rights Movement
Professor MANNING MARABLE (Columbia University):
To understand the role of the black church during the civil rights movement in the 50’s, you need to go back about a century. During slavery the only institution that white racists, the slaveholders, would permit people of African descent to have as their own was the church because the church was the only place where blacks could congregate together in prayer, but they also used that site of faith as a place of gathering resistance, of plotting rebellion, and after the Civil War was over, the church became the only institution where you had a leadership caste, usually of black men, who could authentically represent the interests of the black community because their salaries were paid for by black folk.
Thus, the black church in the 1940s and 50’s was an institution that had resources, it had a leadership elite of black ministers, and it had the institutional ability to help fund long-term protests that were being waged by working class and low-income people.
The black church provided the institutional means for carrying out the campaigns that were waged in the small towns, but at the same time, as a historian it must be noted, that the majority of black churches in major cities did not engage in civil disobedience or in the campaigns led by Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Congress of Racial Equality. Most black ministers stood on the sidelines.
So if you look at say, in Montgomery, perhaps 10-15 black churches were actively involved in the campaign in 1955-56 to end the racial segregation on public busses. In Birmingham in ‘63, perhaps 25 or 30 out of the more than 200 black churches in the city. But the vast majority of churches, while their members participated to a great extent, the ministers themselves tried to stand on the sidelines. And part
of the reason for that, is that there was a split in African American faith communities around the proper role of black ministers in social protest. The Baptists actually divided in 1961 between the National Baptist Convention and the Progressive Baptist Convention which sided with Dr. King and argued that the role of the black clergy was as social activists in challenging racial segregation and fighting for progressive social change. But the vast majority of black Baptist ministers said that that was not the role of the church. And so, there was a tension within the church at a national level. Nevertheless, there would not have been successful civil rights organizations had there not been the financial and the political support of key black denominations.