

ROBERT PENN WARREN REV. J. M. LAWSON Tape 2 3/17/64

Warren: Tape 2 of the conversation with the Reverend J. M. Lawson, continue. What you were saying about the support of - that the bi-racial committee received in Nashville, reminds me of a remark by James Baldwin in his last book. He says that the Southern mob does not represent the will of the majority. He bases on the testimony, as he says, of those most immediately concerned - that is, Negroes who are activists in the South - who are on the picket line. Does this make sense to you?

Lawson: Yes, yes, this is basically correct, and I've been recently reading, simply for more background information, and all, simply reading in the field of history of the negro and history of America in the nineteenth century. And, the pattern by which a buffer was created between the slave owner and the non-slave owner and between the aristocracy that tried to reassert itself after the civil War and the Negro, this buffer goes on now - and Nashville is a perfect example of this.

Warren: Well, let's explain that.

Lawson: Well, in Nashville, we have had - oh, since 1960 when we began the public phase of our effort in Nashville, I cannot count the numbers of times that violence has been turned on and off. For example, the first sit-in campaign in the winter and spring of 1960, we started off with complete police protection, because, of course, we always informed the police chief what we were doing and where we were going, and what stores we

would be at and the time we would be there, and all. Well, we had complete protection for two weeks, and young men came into the downtown area - tried to form, tried to harrass - and many of these groups were just moved out of the downtown area by the police officers. They were not allowed to move. Managers in stores, in fact, worked to see to it that unnecessary groups of - small groups of people never, you know, stayed around their stores. I know this because I observed; I went into many stores we were involved in around the downtown area, throughout this demonstration, to see how things were going and all, and I saw this going on in every store. Then, suddenly, this stopped, and we had gigantic mobs. Then, when it became very clear that a settlement had to be made, the demonstrations went on under peaceful circumstances once again.

Warren: This would seem to imply then, that the mob does act out the will of the majority, or at least the will of the powerful, and the rich.

Lawson: Right. the power structure. In fact, in Nashville, now this wasn't the only time this happened. This happened in many instances. It happened with the demonstrations with the campaign at the point of the downtown movie theatres. It happened in demonstrations in terms of grocery stores. It's happened in terms of demonstrations since that time, in specific restaurant campaigns. On some occasions, the police themselves

acted as the mob. I mean where they roughed up people, or hit people, or pushed people around.

Warren: This would seem to deny what Baldwin said then. I want to get this straight.

Lawson: Now - in this sense. In the majority, not in the numerical sense, but the majority in the power structure sense; in other words, I am quite certain that in the national scene, it was primarily the mayor himself, with possible a few of his closer friends, or even persons of influence on him, who allowed the police to be present at one time and then to disappear at the next moment. I'm certain that this was not the decision or the will - because I can remember, for an example, one instance of a demonstration on a main downtown street in Nashville where the young white men had had a chance to do a certain amount of violence and they chased one Negro boy off the street. He was not related to the demonstration. He was a by-stander. They chased him off the street, up into a second-story arcade beauty parlor, as I recall, where he worked, and there he tried to fight them off with a bottle and they jumped him in the store - in the shop. The police charged in and the next moment they were bringing the Negro boy out to arrest him. And, a couple of white women who were standing on the sidewalk watching this yelled at the police - "You're arresting the wrong one!" Now, this happened, and there are many illustrations which we don't have of people -

white people who spontaneously express the fact that they did not approve of this permitting of the mob, and then trying to pretend that this was the result simply of a group of people peacefully coming in to demonstrate. It was very obviously the turning on of a faucet, or the turning off of a faucet.

Warren: Yes, if the mob is controlled by somebody - put it that way. Now, who controls the mob? You see -

Lawson: Well, my thesis is that it is the power structure, just using this general term as representing certain political or economic powers in a community. My contention is that the power structure that either permits, or refuses to permit the mob to form - now, let me give you another illustration of this. Here in Memphis, the chief of police on the basis of what happened in Nashville said very early, "We will not allow any mobs to occur in Memphis". And, it's been the chief of police, and everyone acknowledges this fact - I mean the Commissioner of Police Armour, of Fire and Police Armour, Claude Armour, had made it clear very early that there would be no mob action in Memphis, and he then has briefed his police and organized his department in that way, so that in Memphis, in spite of the fact that from time to time we have a far more difficult element than in Nashville, because after all we're the capital city, we sometimes say, of Mississippi, or West Tennessee. In spite of that fact, there has been no significant violence in the city of Memphis.

Warren: Also, do you have a less disciplined group of Negroes here? I mean, is there a bigger margin of Negroes who are not subject to the account by -

Lawson: Yes, certainly, certainly. And, also there has been less - the Memphis scene has been less of an organized non-violent effort. I mean, for example, in Memphis there have been very few workshops on non-violence, for the training and disciplining of people. It's been more of an imitation of what they've seen going on in other places in the city and, you know, other places in the South, rather than a leadership committed to the non-violent approach and trying, then, to see to it that we have volunteers developing leaders in this term. In fact, I'm at this moment, conducting the first workshops for non-violence that the active leadership has supported here in the city of Memphis.

Warren: Let's talk about the non-violence a little bit. I have a quotation here from Dr. Kenneth Clark on the matter of non-violence, I'd like to read to you, though you probably know it already. Let me read it to you for your response. This is from Dr. Clark. "On the surface, King's philosophy appears to reflect health and stability, while the black nationalists betray pathology and instability. A deeper analysis, however, might reveal that there is also an unrealistic, if not pathological basis in King's doctrine. The natural reaction to injustice is bitterness and resentment. The form that such bitterness takes

need not be overtly violent, but the corrosion of human spirit seems inevitable. It would seem, therefore, that any demand that the victims of oppression be required to love those who oppress them places an addition and probably intolerable psychological burden upon them." Now, I know you've encountered that notion in various forms before.

Lawson: Now, if Dr. Clark is defining the non-violent approach simply as passivity, or as some persons have conceived it as trying to ignore either one's own feelings and personal hatred and hostility, and/or ignore the presence of violence and injustice, now if he's defining non-violence in that way, then I would quite agree with him. But, if, on the other hand, he's willing to accept what is Dr. King's definition of non-violence, namely, that of creative Christian love that comes from the inside of a person, that in a sense heals a person inwardly and enables him, then, to really be a free man - if he defines it in these terms, as we define it, then of course, I think his statement is quite false. On the contrary, he is ignoring the fact that out of this real definition of the non-violent approach, we see all the time, not only the healing up of anger and fear and guilt on the part of both Negro and white people, but we see remarkable instances of courage, that's genuine courage, I mean, that is courage acting out of a person who is convinced that he must act to help change injustice.

Warren: Now, sometimes the response to this quotation would be that Dr. Clark is referring to a natural man, merely, and not to the natural man redeemed.

Lawson: Yes, that's a good response.

Warren: Yes, but now if I follow you properly, you are saying something in addition to that. You are saying that also Dr.

Clark is neglecting some of the psychological data natural man.

Lawson: Yes, right - exactly.

Warren: That you would base your advocacy of the non-violent approach on a psychological, <sup>grounding</sup> as well as a theological basis, is that right?

Lawson: Very definitely.

Warren: That makes a big difference, of course.

Lawson: Oh, yes, right. For example - psychologists today, when they talk about the need for patients - a mental patient coming to the point of insight - is, they are talking about the fact that a patient with, let us say, serious hostility, must not simply come to recognize that, but that this insight is the point at which then they can begin to see the roots of the hostility, in a sense, dry up, and to be replaced by the growth of the capacity to love and to understand and to accept.

Warren: Now, here is another <sup>set of</sup> speculations that go beyond that. Let's assume that Dr. Clark also has said elsewhere and others do too, that this may work in a Southern Negro society; it does

not apply to the negro population of a large Northern city. Does that make any sense? Now, you were raised in the North. You have seen the North first hand, and if that makes sense, what kind of sense does it make? How does it apply to your whole program?

Lawson: I still disagree with Dr. Clark at this point. I, of course, came into the whole non-violent approach in Ohio as a small boy.

Warren: Was your father - I'm sorry - was your father significant in this fact that you -

Lawson: Not - not - he was partially so, but not as significant from at least the primary motif, as was my mother. Father was more, has been more influential from the point of view of the whole demand for justice and the whole need for social righteousness from the perspective of the Christian faith. This is where my father had a larger impact, although, again, you know, this overlaps in varying ways. But, the point that I was going to make is that though I grew up in a relatively small town in Ohio, this is where for me it became very clear that the whole meaning of Christian love had to be had, a genuine relevancy to the area of race, both in terms of my own security and sense of being a person. And, also, then, from the point of view of being able to react to and change situations of hostility from the society simply because of the color of my skin. Now, it is quite clear

that the only thing that Dr. Clark can say is that in the large Northern city, there is a growing disaffection on the part of the Negro and, therefore, a growing bitterness on his part. In part, this bitterness is fed by the persons who migrated from the South over the last ten-fifteen years, thinking they were going to the land of opportunity, and discovering that the land of opportunity had many booby traps in it - booby traps that they were not aware of. Now, I think all this says is that, therefore, that the problem of appealing to the masses of Negro people in terms of the non-violent approach becomes more difficult, because of this greater sense of bitterness and disaffection.

Warren: You mean that bitterness is greater in the northern city than in the South?

Lawson: Yes, because in the South, in the South the bitterness is still reflected in another way. It's reflected in the South because of the pattern of segregation and the dualism. It is reflected more here out of a kind of passivity and - by a kind of passivity and apathy, which gets itself reflected primarily within the Negro community itself, where most of the contacts with white people are still on this basis of segregation, and within the thought pattern of segregation. And, then, this is brought back into the Negro community itself. It does not direct itself toward the total society, or towards the white person.

Warren: It means a disorganization of life within the Negro

society, that means organization.

Lawson: Exactly. That means that this is certainly one of the features. Of course, it also means a social disorganization in the sense that it becomes exceedingly difficult for negro people to accept the possibilities that other Negroes are trying to lead them in the right way. One example of this is when this fall, when we had some people running for the school board in Memphis, we had actually some Negroes who said, "I'm not going to vote for them. I don't want them interfering with the schools of Memphis".

Warren: A strange, paradoxical situation.

Lawson: Exceedingly so.

Warren: What about the apathy in a place like Mississippi - the voting registration apathy - the largest claim made now is six per cent, and others who are gauging that will say it's as low as three and a half of registration, and a very slow movement, in spite of the efforts being made. But the apathy - some will say, "We're working in it - is very great - you have this - it's very hard to break this crust of apathy".

Lawson: Right. Well, I think that the - in the Mississippi case, we have to constantly understand that the apathy is a pretension. It is an apathy that grows out of the whole enforced pattern of segregation for the negro.

Warren: Oh, clearly, yes.

Lawson: But I've been reading recently, as an example, of the - a man by the name of Charles Cardwell, who was one of the Reconstruction leaders in the State of Mississippi, who was finally shot and killed rather brutally, and the article has been lifting up the ways in which the killing went on of negro people in the State of Mississippi during this period of about 1865 or 1866 on to about 1885, 1890. The numbers are not one, two or three in a town, but in the fifties and in the hundreds, a single town, of killing negroes who voted by the so-called radical terms, or who were supporting the Reconstruction in terms of the radical party group and all.

Warren: See, the present apathy there then and the withdrawal from political life - you think is a long-range reaction from that period of violence?

Lawson: Why yes. I'm - this more convinces me - yes, that here you had the Klu-Klux-Klan and the night riders and this killing of people openly, and willfully, and this has continued. And, that is a pretty formidable kind of pattern to overture immediately, and also the passivity and apathy and the bitterness that comes out of that is going to be far more complex to deal with -

Warren: That is - fear is not the main thing, and as somebody said, fear is not the main thing, something may have come from the fear originally, but is now become a thing itself.

Lawson: The fear - exactly. It is not the main thing - it is only one of the factors that is helping to produce the present pattern in the State of Mississippi.

Warren: Let me go back to something else. We were talking about non-violence. Is it true, as is sometimes said, that the responsibility, in a kind of deeply ironical way, must be on the negro, to practice this. Put it this way - if you have, and I was talking to someone in New York the other day that is deeply interested in this and concerned with the problem - he says, "There's going to be this summer almost certainly violent outbreaks, spontaneous, unorganized, and completely out of control, except by gun point." There's a very great likelihood of this sort of violence. He said, "Then the white man can only do one thing when he faces the Negro mob - take it". Not defend - probably not defend himself. He must act, you see, accept this in non-violent terms. But then the question arises, how can he? He's not disciplined for this. He has no - there's no - he's in a passive position which just makes it possibly non-violent, as an individual. Do you see what I'm trying to mean - the man on the street. He's isn't the law - he hasn't - has had no seminar of non-violence, he's had no philosophy to accommodate this. How can he do this? So there's a possibility then - a moral responsibility in a strange of way may go back to a negro to set this model. Does that make any sense, as an argument?

Lawson: Yes, I think I understand what you are saying, and I would tend to agree that the - that in spite of what has gone on in our history, that the Negro does have a responsibility for trying to help his nation come to a nobler expression of its ideals.

Warren: That's taking the matter more generally, yes.

Lawson: Yes, and I think that the only way in which this can be done is by cleaving to those very ideals. In other words, we talk about the Christian tradition that has certainly sustained many of our principles, and have been written even into our form of law. Well, my thesis is that we must be non-violent primarily, because this is the only way that is consonant with this whole idealistic tradition; the way of love and peace and truth is the only way to achieve these things in society. So, at least from that point - with that kind of an addition, I do believe that it is the Negro's responsibility to be non-violent. Of course, another thing to be said is - and there's a number of other authors have, rather a number of authors have pointed out the theology which has helped to shape the Negro's mind in so many <sup>different</sup> ways - from his early appropriation of the Christian faith in the United States, has been a theology very consistent with the non-violent approach. The Negro spiritual for example - where you will never find a word of hatred expressed for any one - where you in turn find a great sympathy with the suffering

of Jesus, and the sense that somehow the suffering of the Negro, which is an innocent suffering, is clearly identifiable with Jesus. Well, I mean, I think this whole motif is very significant in terms of the way in which Martin Luther King, Jr. found a ripe audience.

Warren: Now, this ripe audience though - just as a question, not a statement, must have this concept of Christian suffering as being redemptive. Transferred to a Christian suffering, which is not passive, though redemptive, but redemptive through action -

Lawson: Yes - redemptive through getting engaged with the cause of the suffering, with the evil system.

Warren: That's a real difference?

Lawson: Oh, yes, very definitely, right.

Warren: How much has influence of Hindu philosophy been on you, Mr. Lawson? Can we talk about that a little bit? Your experience in that?

Lawson: Me, personally, it's had very little influence. The way in which I have been influenced at all from India, would be, of course, in the study of Gandhi and in the way in which he tried to develop the force of the whole Sutti-Aghraha movement in India and in South Africa. Now, even much of this, however, has come through the eyes of people like E. Stanley Jones, the Methodist missionary, who lived for so many years in India

and was an intimate friend of Gandhi, who wrote one of the best books, in fact, on Gandhi. In other words, even my understanding of Gandhi very often has come from, you know, second-hand. Now, from my own personal study of Gandhi and reading his own books and writings, I am quite convinced that Gandhi can not be understood in primarily Hindu terms. He's got to be understood in terms of the nineteenth century education he received as a person - the influence of, in which he admitted himself, the great influence very early in South Africa, of the new Testament - in particular, he said, the Sermon on the Mount - the influence of some of the men who - of some of the people who flocked to Gandhi very early in his life - men like C. F. Andrews, who was an Anglican missionary to India, and who is known in India today even as C. F. A. - Christ's Faithful Apostle. Andrews was a man who took radically, the harsh demands of the new Testament - turn the other cheek, love ye the enemy. E. Stanley Jones also takes these demands rather hard, radically - and both of these men have something like a forty-year personal relationship with Gandhi. So, I see this influence as a much larger influence on my own personal thinking - of course, then, the other thing. I was weaned on the Bible and the New Testament, in particular, and it is from the New Testament perspective that I first began to accept the teachings of my parents in this whole area.

Warren: How much do you think is communicable of this - of non-violence in this perspective? To the masses - black or white - Negro or non-Negro?

Lawson: I think a tremendous amount of it. Now, I have held workshops in almost every state in the South - workshops in non-violence, to all kinds of groups from sophisticated, integrated groups, college groups, university groups, to very unsophisticated people in the delta of Mississippi - all Negro groups; in - I don't vary in terms of the ideas - I vary in terms of terminology. When I found - some of the most exciting experiences I've had in teaching and training have been in the delta Mississippi, where I primarily spoke in Biblical terms and used Biblical illustrations and Biblical stories and myths to illustrate and document the whole idea of Christian non-violence. And found people who were functionally illiterate, exceedingly responsive, and aware of this fact. I've had people say to me, "Reverend Lawson, I've always felt that the only way to change this situation, or to change what we have to put up with, is through Christian love, or through what Christ talked about." Something like - a statement like this has been very frequent.

Warren: There have been some reports, how accurate I don't know, although one of them comes to me from an eye witness, that when the riots started in Birmingham, you see, after the bombing, that there was a fundamental shock to the non-violent leadership

there. This was something that seemed to be outside of prediction. They felt a shock too - that something here was working which was outside their whole concept of a situation. Do you know anything about this? Were you there, by the way, at that time?

Lawson: No. Not when - I went in -

Warren: When the bombing occurred?

Lawson: No, I was not there, at the time of the bombing.

Warren: Now - excuse me - one thing that is attributed - and I can't remember where. I have a note of it and it - I know I have a documentation - is attributed anyway to, I think, Mr. Walker. I said, I think it was to him - that he said, "But these aren't our people." That these - this - the mob started the Negro mob did the - but, the explosion of violence there, the undirected, spontaneous explosion of violence.

Lawson: Well, now, this did not - this certainly did not surprise me. That this had happened, and I'm not sure about about other leaders - I have not heard any of them mention this, and I was with most of them just this past weekend - Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and I have not heard any of them express shock or surprise at this. Now, one of the places where I wonder about this would be the fact that I know Jim Devill stayed in Birmingham through all of this period, while many of the rest of us were going in and out because of churches and whatnot, but

Jim, once Jim got there, I understand, he stayed there literally, throughout -

Warren: Is he there now?

Lawson: He was there - he left this meeting we were in Saturday to go back to Birmingham and he's using it as a kind of a base for work throughout the State. Now, Jim knows from our experience in Nashville that we were able to know when, in a sense, the natives were restless in terms of violence - because we got the reports from varying kinds of people - from labor people, from taxicab people, and just simply from ordinary people in the streets in the sections of the city where violence could occur, where people would come for violence. So, that we could predict - we could predict the possibilities of violence. So I would have the very real feeling that Jim never would have been alert to this. Now - he may have been - there may have been some surprise at the extent to which the Negroes were disillusioned, but certainly, all of us knew in going to Birmingham that the Negro there had been taking dynamiting, spontaneous violence from policemen, intimidation of many, many kinds, from people in that area - and they had been taking this for any number of years. And, I think that all of us would have said, "Well, we know that Birmingham is a city of violence, and we know full well that a non-violent campaign in Birmingham is not going to be like any-

thing else.

Warren: I don't know how to interpret this. I've had some long conversations with Mr. Evers, Charles Evers, one of our long recorded sessions - as a matter of fact the only really long recording. He said that - I talked about non-violence and saying slaughter solves nothing, along this line you see. He was saying Birmingham is a disaster. We have closed the line - lost the lines of communication, to use his phrase, for years to come.

Lawson: Who said that?

Warren: Mr. Evers.

Lawson: In Jackson?

Warren: Yes.

Lawson: He just doesn't know what he's talking about.

Warren: Well, I don't know - I oughtn't to try to start a debate between you, but I was puzzled by it and I played this back to myself, you see, when I got home, and he had attached Birmingham to, he said, a disaster. His exact words.

Lawson: I do not understand -

Warren: I don't follow this - I want to follow this - I want to explore this a little bit, if you can - I thought as a matter of setting you and Mr. Evers at loggerheads, that's not the point - it's expressing an interpretation of the event, you see.

Lawson: Yes, right, right. Now, of course, it should be

said that Charles Evers is not a proponent of the non-violent approach.

Warren: He told me - he says that he is.

Lawson: Well, but - I would like to say a couple of things about this -

Warren: Yes, please.

Lawson: Number 1 - he is brand-new in the movement, and in the field in Jackson, Mississippi. Number 2 - he has weapons in his own house -

Warren: I don't much blame him.

Lawson: For protection. Well, you know, I'm not putting the blame on - but most of us who are involved in this business, do not - including one man, at least two men rather, that I know of in Mississippi - or more than that, but I'm just saying two key men, and one of them is in Jackson - whose lives are definitely marked lives, and they know it and we know it.

Warren: Is Moses one of those?

Lawson: Moses is certainly one of those.

Warren: I would say surely.

Lawson: Moses is one of them, and Ed King in Jackson, Mississippi, is another man - and certainly his life is a marked life, and he carries no weapon around with him, or has none in his home. Now, the point I'm making is this - that those of us who are proponents of the non-violent approach, if we had guns, we've gotten

rid of them.

Warren: You have made a thorough policy then - and have no - admit no exceptions.

Lawson: Yes, certainly. And we know too many people, you see, in the movement today, who have given up their weapons, even those who had a hunting gun, you know, and went out occasionally to find a rabbit, have gotten rid of their hunting gun. So, then the third thing I would say is I'm not certain how often, how much Charles Evers has been into Birmingham. I've not seen him there myself. <sup>am</sup> I/certain he may have gone in this past fall, perhaps, or the winter for speeches, or something, but now, let's say this. We were just talking this past weekend, that in one real way there is more genuine communication in Birmingham today than there was a year ago.

Warren: Explain that, will you please sir?

Lawson: Well, I'm thinking for an example of one doctor, who because of the Birmingham campaign has decided to give leadership in the white community for helping Birmingham to break through some of the problems of segregation in Birmingham.

Warren: This is a white doctor?

Lawson: This is a white doctor, I'm talking about. I'm thinking of a Dean of a school in Birmingham, who has taken the initiative himself to try to bring groups of Negroes and whites

together, for the purpose of having frank conversations.

Warren: Is that Birmingham Southern?

Lawson: Birmingham Southern. I'm thinking, for example, of the President of Millsaps College - not Millsaps College, but of Miles college in Birmingham, and I'd that Dean of the University, that paper shouldn't be public -

Warren: All right. You can check into that.

Lawson: Yes, the President of Miles College, who in the last year and a half, has gotten more and more involved in frank confrontation with white persons in the city of Birmingham.

Warren: This is the end of Tape 2 with Mr. Lawson. continue on to 3