

Interview with **Rev. Will Campbell**

November 3, 1985

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00:00:02:00

[camera roll 318]

[sound roll 1310]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: HAVE SPEED—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YOU HAVE SPEED AND THE CAMERA'S TURNING AND YOU CAN MARK IT.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK. REVEREND CAMPBELL, I'D LIKE TO TALK FIRST ABOUT THE, THE SOUTH AND, IN PARTICULAR, NASHVILLE AND THE TWO CHURCHES: THE BLACK CHURCH AND THE WHITE CHURCH. AND WHERE THEY WERE AT SAY IN 1960, BETWEEN '50s AND '60s. JUST GIVE ME AN IDENTITY FOR THE SOUTH AT THAT TIME.

Campbell: Well, of course, the churches were like the rest of society, rigidly segregated. So that you had a First Baptist Church which was white on Broadway. Then you had a First Baptist Church, which is now called the First Baptist Capitol Hill, which was black. Hundred years earlier, they had been one. And one of the great tragedies, I think, for the, for the institutional church was that, that they did split following the Civil War. They were one church then. And the pastor of the First Baptist Church in 1960, Reverend Kelly Miller

Smith, First Baptist Church of Capitol Hill, which was the black church, just a few blocks from the white First Baptist Church—both of ‘em were in a massive building campaign. So the pastor, Reverend Smith, wrote to the Pastor of the white church and said, look, it hasn't been that long ago by God's time, a hundred years, that we were one church. Now we find ourselves a few blocks apart we're both in a massive building campaign, why don't we at least talk in terms of, of building one church? And the response was our people feel there are too few good churches in downtown Nashville. Not too many—very evasive things. So, so the structured church was, there was this breach that black people didn't go to church with white people and vice versa.

00:01:55:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. NOW IN 1960 WHEN THE SIT-INS BEGIN AND THE PROTEST CAMPAIGN IN NASHVILLE BEGINS, HOW DOES THAT PLAY INTO THE, THE MINDS OF PEOPLE IN TERMS OF HOW THEY'RE DEALING WITH EACH OTHER AND, AND, AND JUST THE, THE IDEA OF, OF THE—YOU KNOW, THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH AND, AND PEOPLE NOT BEING ABLE TO REALLY COME TO GRIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER. WHAT—HOW IS THE CHURCHES [sic] PLAYING INTO THAT? WITH VANDERBILT AS A MAJOR INSTITUTION AT THAT TIME.

Campbell: Yeah. Well, of course, the white established structured church tried very hard not to deal with it at all. Just simply ignore it.

INTERVIEWER: WHEN YOU SAY, “IT,” YOU HAVE TO GIVE ME WHAT “IT” AND ALL THOSE THINGS ARE.

Campbell: OK, let's go back then and—I'm, I'm not sure what you're asking me to talk about here.

INTERVIEWER: PLEASE, STOP ONE SECOND.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH, SURE.

[cut]

00:02:44:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

Campbell: Now, are you going to ask a question or do you just want me to start talking?

INTERVIEWER: I'LL ASK A QUESTION. TALKING ABOUT VANDERBILT AND BRING IN JIM LAWSON AND HIM BEING EXPELLED AND THE ROLE

VANDERBILT WAS PLAYING AS A, AS A, AS A PART OF THAT, THAT STRUGGLE—

Campbell: Yeah. OK. James Lawson was a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Was, I believe, the first black student. He was more active perhaps in the training and preparing the young people in Nashville for the sit-in movement because he had been in prison himself during the Korean War. He was a C.O. resister, had refused to register for the draft and had been sent to federal prison because of that. Vanderbilt took the position, when the sit-ins began, and he was charged by the city with criminal anarchy that they were not expelling him because of his involvement in the freedom movement or the sit-in movement, but because he wa—had violated a state statute. Now, keep in mind that he had not been convicted of this when he was expelled. He was simply charged with this, arrested and thrown in prison, but he was expelled. The, the black church was virtually unanimously for him. The white churches, those who even would bother to discuss it among themselves, were almost unanimously against it. Now, that is not to say that there were not individuals within the white church—both at Vanderbilt University and in the structured church, the steeples as I call them, there were individuals, but you always have to distinguish between individuals and institutions. Vanderbilt, as an institution, was, in my judgment, totally irresponsible almost criminal in their actions toward James Lawson. Individuals within that faculty and within the Vanderbilt community at large, many individuals were outspoken in be—on behalf of James Lawson, were very much in sympathy with him. But institutions are so powerful and so, in my judgment, so evil, that it made no difference. You know. These faculty people could say—and and the, the, the medical school faculty, almost all of them, threatened to resign. The divinity faculty did on one occasion almost all of them resign. But the, but the, the institution goes pell-mell on its way and says what, you know, this guy is a threat to the institution. And if something becomes a threat to the institution, then that institution is just gonna push it out of its way, which is precisely what happened. He was expelled and the institution survived and went on.

00:05:55:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, IN 1960 PEOPLE SAY THAT NASHVILLE WAS A PRETTY PROGRESSIVE CITY, ESPECIALLY IN TERMS OF RACE. THAT, THAT THEY HAD CITY EMPLOYEES WHO WERE BLACK. THERE WERE MOVES, PEOPLE WERE SAYING, THERE WERE MOVES—MOVEMENT IN THE CITY TO, TO DEAL WITH THE RACE ISSUE AND THAT THIS WAS NOT—THE PROTEST MOVEMENT WAS JUST TOO—WASN'T TIME. IT WAS LIKE PUSHING 'EM TOO FAST. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THAT AND THE FEELINGS OF THE, OF THE COMMUNITY TOWARDS—ABOUT THAT WHOLE—

Campbell: I think in 1960, Nashville was a progressive city, but so was Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 when Governor Faubus called out the troops to stop this horrendous onslaught of nine black children coming to Central High School. So was New Orleans, where you had serious riots the, the same year and the following year, and it took marshals to escort one child through the lines and so on. But when you're, when you're, when you say progressive, I think it reflected a mood with, within a, a, a large group of individuals, but when those

individuals go up against structures and institutions and—well, let's take segregation as an institutionalized reality in Nashville. Then those individuals made little or no difference. So, if you came and talked to X number of, of white and black in, in Nashville in 1960 or the late 50's, you might well go away saying, well, this city can do anything it wants to because it's—it has an enlightened citizenry. But, but these evil structures are so, so institutionalized and so demonic and so difficult to deal with, that these quote "enlightened" individuals were relatively powerless.

00:07:53:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. NOW, [coughs] GOING—GETTING INTO THE MOVEMENT AND SAY LOBY'S [sic] HOUSE IS—LOOBY'S HOUSE IS BOMBED. WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CITY AT THAT POINT? WHAT—HOW DID PEOPLE RESPOND?

Campbell: Mr. Z. Alexander Looby, who was a great man, a black attorney conservative, politically, a Lincoln Republican of many years. No one could accuse him of being a, a wild eyed radical politically. And when his house was bombed or dynamited, I think, it, it solidified, especially the black community, and it enraged a segment of the white community in a fashion that nothing else had. When you had the hundred or hundreds of black students coming down and sitting in at the Woolworth stores and so on all of the, the five-and-dime stores and department stores. That was one thing, because students are supposed to be irresponsible, you know, and wild eyed. And so, you just kind of shrug that off and if the police get a little rough, you know, and overzealous and throwing 'em and pack thirty into a paddy wagon that's designed for eight—well, after all, you know, they're just, they're students. But this elderly man who had been a citizen, a lawyer, a councilman and so on, over these years, over the years, and when his house is, is in a rubble heap, this did outrage a lot of people. Now, I would have to acknowledge, much as I would like to say being afflicted with this incurable skin disease called lightness, that, that it solidified the, the white community to go out and join the marches—it did not. But there was the, the, the mass march to City Hall and there was a white Mayor who came out there and who, with considerable prodding from that brilliant and beautiful leader named Diane Nash, who kept pushing him—but, Mr. Mayor, you are our Mayor, sir. Do you think that segregation is morally de—defendable? And he eventually had to say, I do not. Now that, in my judgment, was the turning point. That encounter was a turning point. So you had a white Mayor of a leading city reflecting on this alleged progressive characteristic of the city. And once he says this and then you have a leading black citizen with his, his house dy- dynamited. Now it goes back to the dynamiting so that whoever set off that dynamite or bomb blast, did more to, to integrate the lunch counters and the department stores in Nashville, I think, than, than all the sit-ins combined.

INTERVIEWER: NO KIDDING. WANNA [sic] CUT?

00:11:05:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE JUST ABOUT TO—

00:11:06:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 319]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THREE-ONE-NINE. ROLLING AND—

INTERVIEWER: THE CLOSER, THE TIGHTER IT IS—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —DOESN'T MAKE THE FILM.

Campbell: [laughs] Yeah.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, ORLANDO, IT'S ALL YOURS. WE'RE FOCUSED AND SET.

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME ABOUT THAT LETTER WITH JIM LAWSON. HIS ATTEMPTS TO—HE WAS GOING TO RESIGN INSTEAD OF LETTING THEM EXPELL HIM.

Campbell: Well, the pressures had been mounting, of course, for, for days and Jim Lawson being a, a considerate and a gentle person, basically, agreed to withdraw voluntarily from Vanderbilt University, from the divinity school. Called me and asked me to come over to go over the letter he had prepared the night before, he and his wife, who had been my secretary, Dorothy Wood. And my position was, no, you don't do that. You don't let them off the hook. That you're gonna go, you're, you're gonna have to leave Jim, but make 'em kick you out so that they and the world will know what this—where this institution stands and what it's up to. Which is what he did. Then when he went over to the meeting that had been convened for the purpose of announcing that Mr. Lawson had agreed to withdraw and for the sake of harmony and peace in the Vanderbilt fellowship here. And when Jim said, I'm not withdrawing, of course, there was a great deal of hostility. And the Dean of the Divinity School asked all outsiders to leave and so the press people started leaving and then he looked at me and said, this is a family matter. And, and so I, being a gentle, gentleman too, started to leave and Jim and some of the other white students caught my jacket and said, said to the Dean, he is family. Which I considered that I was family. I'd been very much involved in the entire situation because of the relationship of, of his wife being my secretary and working with me and he being a friend also. But had he resigned on his own, I think, it would have been a

totally different, different picture that the world would have got of what was going on in Nashville. Because they would have shrugged it off and said, everybody's happy and there's no—but, but in reality this—there might have been a little smooth scar healed over, but underneath it was still this seething caldron of infection which had to erupt, had to erupt sometime and it might as well have been then and there.

INTERVIEWER: OK. CAN WE CUT FOR ONE SECOND?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

[cut]

00:13:45:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I HAVE SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THANK YOU, SIR.

INTERVIEWER: OK. THAT EPISODE ON THE STEPS, ON THE STEPS OF THE STATEHOUSE AND NOT BEING AN END OR BEGINNING. TALK TO ME ABOUT THAT.

Campbell: Yes. When, when Diane Nash, later Diane Bevel, had the confrontation with Mayor West and for the first time the Mayor of this city went on record as saying that merchants cannot morally justify taking people's money, but giving them unequal service in terms of, of, of, of hiring, of restroom facilities, of, of eating facilities, drinking fountains and so on. This was, this was the, the first crack in the frozen pond of, of racial segregation in, in this city. It did not mean the melting of the ice. That everything was over, but it was a starting point. And so, here the Mayor has said this. Now, before anything really was, was accomplished there had to be the, the, the Easter boycott of the stores, the virtual drying up of the downtown area and, I think, for the first time the, the merchants and the city officials realized that we were talking more than just the right to a hamburger and a cup of coffee at the five and ten cent store. That we are talking about employment. We're talking about fairness, in general, and treating people as human beings. And really what we're talking about, and this was the most frightening of all, that we were talking about a redistribution of America's wealth. Just as when the, the quote—to make a big jump here from Nashville to the national church scene, when James Forman walked into Riverside Church in New York and read the manifesto. Talking about reparation for misdeeds of, of white churches and demanding of white churches that they give fifty million dollars or whatever of their vast wealth for the first time the national scene saw that what we're talking about is more than a cup of coffee and a hamburger.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Campbell: I think you—I gave you more than you asked for, but—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE STILL ROLLING. OH SHOOT.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S, YEAH, LET'S CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

[cut]

00:16:09:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLL SOUND, PLEASE. SPEED—

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK. THAT WAS A MARK. LET ME JUST GET THIS SETTLED HERE. IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK. WHAT WERE YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THEM TURNING BACK AT THAT POINT AND BRING JOHN SEIGENTHALER'S NAME INTO YOUR—

Campbell: Well, certainly it was mixed. John Seigenthaler, who had been the editor of the, of the local newspaper, was at that—and a journalist with the Nashville Tennessean, was at that time working with Attorney General Kennedy, as I recall. And asked me if I had enough influence to get the, the movement to turn back when Bull Connor in Birmingham had, of course, bought the Freedom Riders back to the county line and so on. And it was obvious that the Nashville kids, as we called them, were going to continue this. And my feelings were mixed. Number one, having been born and reared in Mississippi and knowing the, the climate in the white community there, I really believed they would be killed. And so, I didn't want people like John Lewis and Diane Nash dying at the hands of, of quote "my people" in Mississippi. On the other hand, I knew that in terms of the long range goals of the movement and the fierce determination and dedication of those youngsters at the time, you know, they were like eighteen, nineteen years old. I knew they were going to do it and there was, there was nothing I could do but, but weep for what I was certain was going to happen, and, and for the tragedy even if it didn't happen that the, the notion that a group of people can't ride through my state in a, in a, a Greyhound bus is, is rather overwhelming.

00:18:00:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. YOU USED THAT TERM IN YOUR BOOK OF LUNACEAN [sic] REALITY AND I—WHEN YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT THE WILLIE MCGEE EXECUTION. BUT I'D LIKE YOU TO VIEW—TO USE—IN THAT SAME FRAME OF

MIND, TALK ABOUT MONTGOMERY WHEN YOU CAME IN TO MEET TO, TO SEE JOHN SEIGENTHALER IN THE HOSPITAL WHAT YOU ENCOUNTERED THERE.

Campbell: Was that, wasn't that Mothers Day?

INTERVIEWER: NO THIS WAS AFTER. THIS WAS THE, LIKE THE, AROUND THE 26TH OF MAY. THIS WAS AFTER THE MONTGOMERY AMBUSH.

Campbell: I remember that. Yeah. OK, OK. When the Freedom Riders reached Montgomery and apparently the arrangement had been made that there would be no police protection for X number of minutes. Five minutes or whatever. So that a mob was, was, was set loose to, to do what they will. And John Seigenthaler was there as a personal representative of the President. And two young women were trying to get into a cab and were being turned away and were being roughed up and John went over and said, I am a personal representative of the President, and that's the last thing he remembered saying for a long time because someone caught him over the back of the head with a steel pipe. And he lay in the sun there for a long time. And, and I was not present. I was not there at the time, and I, a, a friend of mine, a young attorney here, George Baird and I, chartered a little plane the next morning, Sunday morning. And John—we thought he was in, in critical condition, of course, they didn't know how seriously he was hurt, but he was in the hospital there. He used to kid me when I was working for the National Council of Churches. He'd say, oh, here comes the guy who represents forty million Protestants and, of course, we didn't represent anybody, you know. So I walked into the room and I said in his hospital room, and the priest was on his way out, and I thought, oh Lord, is he gone in there doing unction on John Seigenthaler. And I said, John, I'm here representing forty million Protestants and he threw me the bottle of holy water and said, well here, I think one of your forty million damned near killed me yesterday down at that bus station. [laughs] And I knew John gonna be OK.

00:20:12:00

INTERVIEWER: TALK TO ME ABOUT DRIVING THROUGH THE CITY AND, AND LISTENING IN ON SERMONS AND WHAT YOU—

Campbell: And driving around after—

INTERVIEWER: START AGAIN PLEASE.

Campbell: Where, where do you want me to start?

INTERVIEWER: I WANT YOU TO START, ABOUT DRIVING THROUGH AND LISTENING TO SERMONS AND WHAT YOU WOULD HEAR AND WHAT IT MEANT TO YOU.

Campbell: Well, after the visit with, with John, I wanted to go and see the students in various hospitals. There was a, a black, St. Jude's, I believe was the name of the Catholic operated hospital on the edge of town where the Freedom Riders had been taken black and white. And

some of 'em were in critical condition and I went to visit them and, and, of course, I was lost and scared and, and just driving at times, aimlessly around the city, at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. And here was a city that had been, the day before, in utter chaos and people were being clubbed and beaten and, and the city was, was, was in turmoil. And not one preacher and I kept moving the knob and listening to this sermon and that one, over the hour or so time there, and you might as well have been on a different planet, you know. That there was no mention of this in sermons, no prayer for forgiveness, to say nothing of deliverance. And so, that this, this sharp cleavage between what was happening in the black churches of Montgomery where mass meetings were going on every night and, and I am certain that if a black preacher had been on the radio that day, there would have been mention of this, both in, in, in prayer, in praise, in, in homily and, and in, psalm. But the, the white church, there was no mention of this, because it is controversial—

00:22:08:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Campbell: —and there's one thing sacred in any institution and that's harmony.

INTERVIEWER: WE JUST RAN OUT.

00:22:14:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 320]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLL SOUND. SPEED. AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK. IF YOU COULD EXPLAIN TO ORLANDO, FIRST OF ALL, HOW YOU FIRST HEARD ABOUT THE MURDER OF EMMETT TILL AND WHAT YOUR OWN PERSONAL REACTION WAS. WHAT THAT MEANT TO YOU.

Campbell: Well, I, I heard about it on the—in the newspapers—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M GONNA HAVE YOU START AGAIN AND, AND MENTION YOU HEARD—

Campbell: OK. I got it.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YOU GOT IT. YOU KNOW WHAT WE'RE—

Campbell: Yeah.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GO RIGHT AHEAD, SIR.

Campbell: Well, I read of the, the murder of a young black child, really, fifteen years old, named Emmett Till in the newspapers and, of course, on the radio. And I was Director of Religious Life, at the time, at the University of Mississippi, and I knew that this man would never—whoever had committed this, would never be convicted. And there was a long drawn out trial and in all fairness to the judge in the case, I watched some of it in the Courtroom, I think, he did the best he could, but the, the two men who were charged with this murder were at the time heroes. Now the strange part of it is, as soon as the trial was over and Mr. William Bradford Huie wrote a story for *Look* magazine showing the check that he had made out to, to tell the real story, where they said, yeah, we took him down there and, you know, we beat him and then we killed him and threw him in the river, Tallahatchie River, and so on. Those people were nobodies after that. They were disgraced. Which is a strange conflict and dichotomy in, in southern society that while they were being accused of this crime, we have to rally to their defense and, and take up money and, and hire lawyers and all the rest. But then when it's over, look, why did you have to disgrace us like that? Now get out of town. We don't really want to see you again.

00:24:11:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WHAT WAS—DO YOU HAVE A SENSE OF, OF WHAT THE REACTION, IF ANY, FROM WHITE MISSISSIPPIANS IN GENERAL WAS TO THE NEWS OF THAT, FIRST OF THE, OF THE LYNCHING AND THEN OF THE, THE TRIAL AND THE VERDICT.

Campbell: It's, it's very difficult to believe that in, in 1955 intelligent, civilized, and, and often sophisticated people would say, well, that didn't really happen. That the NAACP, which was considered the radicals at the time [laughs], had this boy killed and thrown in the river to embarrass white Mississippi or to raise money and so on. All kinds of stories—or that wasn't really his body, his mother discredited. That—they—some black undertaker from Chicago brought a bum down here who had died of a drug overdose on the streets and threw it in the river and Emmett Till's back in Chicago laughing at us. And, and these things which is today impossible even though I lived through it and experienced it, to believe that those things were being seriously said and reported in allegedly responsible organs of the media, but it happened.

INTERVIEWER: GREAT. GOOD.

Campbell: All right.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:25:14:00

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