

Rufus Burrow Jr., *A Child Shall Lead Them: Martin Luther King Jr., Young People, and the Movement*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2014. 331 pp. \$19.00. ISBN: 9781451484540.

Rufus Burrow Jr. has been the Indiana Professor Emeritus of Christian Thought and Professor of Theological Social Ethics at Christian Theological Seminary for three decades. In recent years, he has ravenously researched and written numerous works on Martin Luther King, including three in 2014. Published just days after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, his *A Child Shall Lead Them: Martin Luther King Jr., Young People, and the Movement* is a timely contribution for the seminary.

Burrow chronicles the contributions of young people from the Montgomery bus boycotts to the Selma march, with stops in Greensboro (the sit-ins), Anniston (Freedom Rides), Birmingham, and Mississippi along the way. His 318 pages, footnoted with 589 references to primary sources, are dedicated to a telling of history through the lens of a deep concern about “today’s youth,” contrasting our current “epidemic” of historical ignorance and technological distractions with conscientious young people in the 60s who “did not wait to be given either the permission or support of adults before courageously leaping into the fray” (9).

Burrow lends plenty of space for the inspiration of lesser-known child-heroes of the Civil Rights Movement like nine-year old Gwendolyn Patton, who intentionally spilled water when a white counter boy called her a racial slur in Montgomery in 1952 and fifteen-year old Claudette Colvin who, two months *before* Rosa Parks made history in 1960, refused to give up her seat on the public bus and was dragged off by police who kicked her multiple times with their heavy boots.

Bernard and Colia Lafayette, accepting a SNCC post in Selma, joined other leaders who “knew that they would, on a daily basis, be dealing with white racists who were no less brutal in their treatment of blacks than the Nazis” (221). They faced intense opposition from both whites and skeptical black locals until the night of June 12, 1963 (the same night Medgar Evers was murdered in Jackson), when twenty-two-year old Bernard was ambushed and beaten severely in Selma. He no longer had any trouble finding a place to hold his mass meetings. Local black pastors knew he was committed to the cause.

When things began to really heat up in Selma in 1965, more than 1000 demonstrators were arrested on February 1. Half of these were children, who just days later, posted up outside of the hospital to pray for the speedy recovery of Sheriff Clark who checked himself in for exhaustion.

Much of Burrow’s focus is, appropriately, on King. In October 1960, he joined several dozen student-activists from the newly formed SNCC in a sit-in at the lunch counter at Rich’s Department Store in Atlanta. They were arrested, jailed

and refused bail. The media wanted to hear from King, but he put the focus on the ingenuity of the young leaders whom he was following. As Burrow writes, "when news media representatives attempted to credit King with igniting the sit-in, he immediately corrected them by saying that it was the students who invited him to join them. He was not willing to upstage the youths or to say or do anything to make it appear that they were not capable of initiating and engaging in responsible protests on their own" (63).

King, of course, was singled out and sentenced to four months of hard labor at a prison 200 miles from home. The next year, King was invited by SNCC to participate in the Freedom Rides. When King declined, after much discernment with his colleagues, the young leaders of SNCC felt disrespected. King loved young people, but there were tensions and complexities along the journey.

Burrow writes with a spiritual burden. At several points along the journey, *A Child Shall Lead Them* shifts from dramatic narration to lamentation. "Sadly," Burrow writes, "we have not seen the likes of such a sustained spirit among youths in the US since that exciting period in the 1960s" (80).

In Burrow's concluding chapter entitled "Who Will Carry The Struggle Forward?" he grumbles over the generational shift in parenting in black homes, which he describes as a failure to teach children obedience and respect. He calls intra-community violence and homicide among young Afrikan American males "the most tragic phenomenon" and groans over the "cheapening of the lives of young Afrikan American males."

He lays out a seven-point solution, "gleaned from the work and approach of youthful activists and King during the struggle for freedom and civil rights" (315):

1. Belief in a personal God and the highest estimate of the worth of human beings;
2. Possession and development of character and courage;
3. Need for self-acceptance;
4. Role of black churches;
5. Ridding Congress of racism;
6. Insisting that criticizing the US for its moral limitations is not unpatriotic; and
7. The need for mass civil disobedience.

Although these are all worthy goals, and although Burrow makes it clear that adults need to listen intently to young people and offer them leadership positions, his solutions tend to come off as too simplistic and moralizing. An example: "young people cannot continue making the mistake of burying themselves in computer games and social media conversations hour after precious hour each and every day" (317).

In *A Child Shall Lead Them*, Burrow has contributed a delicious account of how

King and other local and national leaders reacted to and encouraged young people and how young people's fearlessness, sense of commitment, energy and enthusiasm influenced the leaders themselves.

This work surely ought to be read and discussed at the seminary, but it struggles to connect with the daily realities of the sanctuary and the street, demanding a more systemic analysis and irenic engagement with today's youth than Burrow has offered.

In Detroit, where I live and work, Afrikan American women like Monica Lewis Patrick, Debra Taylor, Maureen Taylor and Alice Jennings are leading the struggle against corporate-sponsored, state-imposed emergency management. Non-elected officials have siphoned federal funds allocated for mortgage relief and transferred them towards "blight removal." They've closed down dozens of well-performing schools, shut-off water and foreclosed on homes of low-income residents. All of these policies have overwhelmingly targeted the city's black residents (40 percent of whom live below the poverty level) who have stayed and paid while young white gentrifiers scoop up land and homes as "investments."

These women have made strides recruiting young Afrikan Americans, fueled more by hip-hop than the Holy Ghost. The youth are hitting the streets with water deliveries, crisis hotline work, door-to-door canvassing, legal help, protests and workshops. These middle-aged leaders are "keeping it real" not only by listening to *young people*, but also by listening to *what young people are listening to*, fresh scripts and rhythms compelling them towards activism and advocacy.

Following the Dr. King that emerged *after* Selma, Burrow's conclusions require a more tenacious call to resist the principalities and powers of American imperialism, capitalism, and white supremacy. Over the past three decades, policies like the War on Drugs, No Child Left Behind, Three Strikes, and the crippling of affirmative action (just to name a few) have suffocated young people of color. "The whole Jericho road must be transformed," King proclaimed in his "Beyond Vietnam" speech exactly a year before his death.¹

If young people of color are going to "save the soul of America" in the era of *The New Jim Crow*² it's going to look different than it did five decades ago. Since the publication of *A Child Shall Lead Them*, we have witnessed the masses harnessing social media to hit the streets in Ferguson, Staten Island and numerous urban centers, shutting down freeways with marches and die-ins. As "I Am A Man" is

1 The text and audio of the speech are available at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/.

2 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012). The book examines the criminal justice system's targeting of young black men.

replaced with #BlackLivesMatter, young Afrikan Americans are leading a movement with their hands up and headphones in. The rest of us should follow.

TOMMY AIREY lives in Detroit, MI, and serves as a Mission Advocate with Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries.