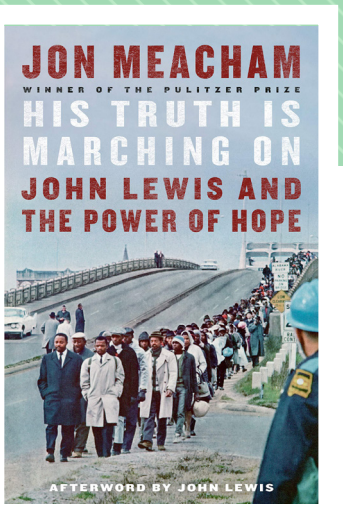
CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Alyssa Aldape



His Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope

By Jon Meacham

Introduction and Overview

Before he was a congressional representative, John Lewis, a faith leader and the civil rights leader we learn about in school, he was a young man fueled by hope and a vision of a world that could be.

In the book, *His Truth is Marching On*, Jon Meacham gives us an overview of the life of John Lewis from childhood to 1968. During this brief period of time for a man who lived such a rich life, we learn of key events and moments in Lewis' life that were part of the bigger movement for equal rights in America. Meacham writes on the themes of racism in America and the role nonviolent resistance played in the civil rights movement. He begins with Lewis' childhood and the origins of his faith and the genesis of his awareness of segregation around him in the deep South.

In the next chapters, we learn of Lewis' early days at the American Baptist Theological Seminary as well as the beginnings of his civil rights work and his partners in the struggle, including the freedom rides, the work for voting rights in the south, the violence experienced at the hands of those who opposed equality, and the ongoing fight of today and what it means to carry the work forward.

While many books and television specials have been produced about Rep. John Lewis, Jon Meacham offers us another opportunity to remember his humble yet profound work and the bigger implications it has for people of faith. As a child and young man, he believed his calling was to be a preacher; but his understanding of the Gospel moved him to put his understanding of God's love up against the empire. May his life and struggle be an open invitation for us to continue the work of the Beloved Community.

Themes and Figures:

- Nonviolent resistance in the Civil Rights Movement
- Racism in the United States
- Creating Beloved Community
- Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.

Terms:

- Beloved Community
- Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Congress of Racial Equity
- Freedom Rides
- Freedom Summer
- Jim Crow Laws
- Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
- Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
- Spirit of History
- Voting Rights Act of 1965

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Book Discussion Questions

Chapter 1: A Hard Life, A Serious Life

- Discuss the context into which John Lewis is born, including the influence of his grandfather and his father. What do the Emancipation Proclamation and Jim Crow mean for Lewis' family?
- What role did the Christian faith and church play for the young John Lewis?
- What was Lewis' response to hearing Dr. King preach on the Beloved Community? Why was it so urgent for him?

Chapter 2: The Spirit of History

- Discuss John Lewis' American Baptist Theological Seminary years and the ways in which it became a launching point of sorts for the young civil rights leader.
- At one point, Lewis decides not to go pursue an integration effort due to the repercussions it could have on his family. Discuss the bigger implications of the struggle and what it meant for the loved one of such leaders.
- In pages 71 and onward, Meacham recounts the moment John Lewis chooses the path of nonviolent protesting and the real danger he encountered while protesting. Read through the list of "tips" Lewis wrote down on p. 72 and discuss.

Chapter 3: Soul Force

- Discuss the response to *Boynton v. Virginia*. In what ways was this ruling "lip service" to Black citizens? How did Black students and other allies test the waters of desegregation?
- While Bull Connor was a well-known prominent opponent of civil rights, he represents a larger majority of opposers who used their form of power to exclude and harm the Black community during the Freedom Rides. Discuss the power local authorities had in harming the Freedom Riders and the historical implications of police brutality.
- What images from this chapter move you to stop and ponder the actions shown? If you haven't, take a moment to reflect on the images.

Chapter 4: In the Image of God and Democracy

- What parallel does Meacham draw between the south of the 1960s and 1860s?
- On page 129, we read that Lewis spoke of the Spirit of History at work during one historical week in June of 1962. What did he mean by this?
- The leaders of the civil right movement received criticism from all sides, white leaders thinking they were too aggressive and other Black leaders such as Malcolm X believing they were not being radical enough. Discuss the energy around the March on Washington and its place in history despite the critiques.

Chapter 5: We Are Going to Make You Wish You Was Dead

- After the terrorist attack by Klansmen at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, many asked what was the good of the nonviolent movement?

  "The bombing gave the debate over nonviolence new resonance. What good were the Lawson-taught troops doing, it was asked, when they were fighting with love and the haters were using dynamite?" (p.151)

Nonviolence is an issue that would be revisited throughout the movement continuing even today. As non-Black allies and observers of the movement, how do you reconcile the very dangerous choices these justice seekers made?

- In response to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Lewis said, "We felt glad, but not joyous." What did he mean by this?
- In 1964, Lewis and others began to focus on voting rights. How does this fight continue today in the U.S.? In your state?

Chapter 6: I'm Going to Die Here

- After the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, King and others wanted to march from Selma to Montgomery, splitting the movement into two factions—one some saw as an important visual while others saw it as grandstanding. Discuss what the march from Selma means now. How did this direct action persuade President Johnson?
- What is your response to Amelia Boynton's words: "No one's going to give you anything, you must demand it." Discuss her quiet defiance.
- "We cannot jump, we're going to have to keep marching" (p.195). On page 196, Meacham describes the moral clarity Lewis realizes in those moments on the bridge. A clear example of good versus evil for the world to see. Lewis understood the sacrifice required to establish Beloved Community. Knowing what we know now of that march, would you have joined?

Chapter 7: This Country Don't Run on Love

- Just as the role of non-violence in Birmingham and in other instances was questioned, what role does nonviolent resistance play post-Selma and in the ensuing months of 1965? In California?
- What toll did the violence and death take on those who were in the struggle?
- "The problem we faced now was not something so visible or easily identifiable as a Bull Connor blocking our way. Now we needed to deal with the subtler and much more complex issues of attaining economic and political power, of dealing with attitudes and actions held deep inside people and institutions that, now that they were forced to let us through the door, could still keep the rewards inside those doors out of our reach" (p.214). Lewis saw that the movement was changing and not as easy to prove as before. What does it look like today?

Epilogue: Against the Rulers of the Darkness

- In the epilogue, John Lewis is described as writing that history honors those who marched at Selma and not Bull Connor. What can we learn from both today? Who are the Bull Connors of the present day who are obstructing the realization of Beloved Community?
- In the end, it was his faith that compelled John Lewis to get in the way and get into "good trouble." How does his witness move you to get into good trouble?

What Can You Do?

The work for the Beloved community did not end in 1962, 1964, 1968 or in 2020. There are ways you can speak up for brothers and sisters in your communities that are still marginalized.

Voting Rights:

Know your and your neighbors' rights at the poll: ***https://www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights***

Contact your representatives and express your concern for legislation regarding voting rights.
https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative

Pay attention to your local government. Change happens at both the local and national levels.

Further Reading:

The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America
by Richard Rothsetin

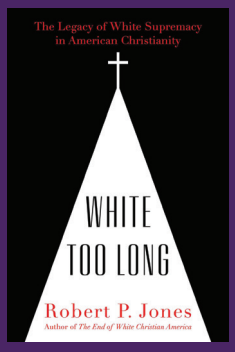
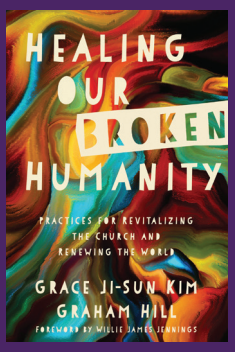
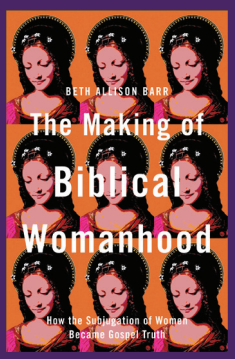
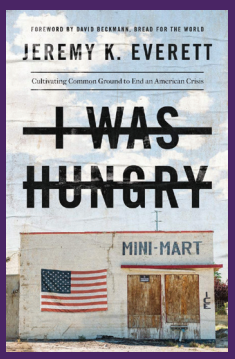
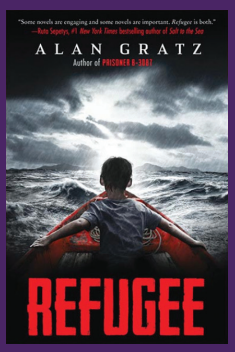
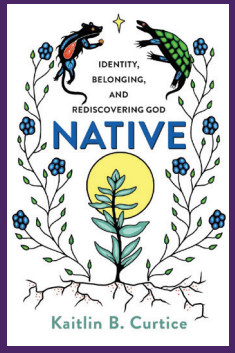
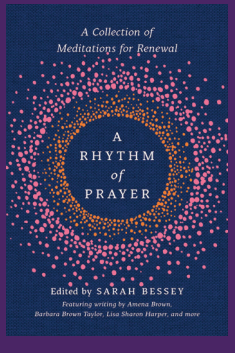
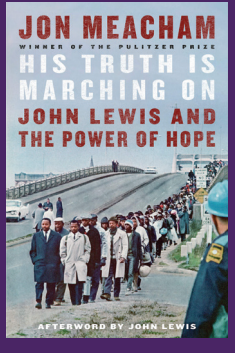
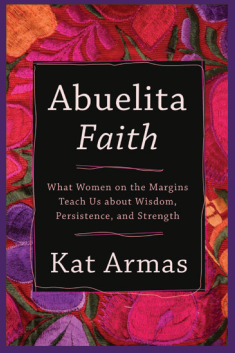
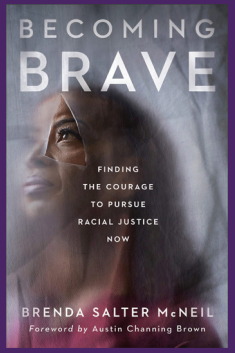
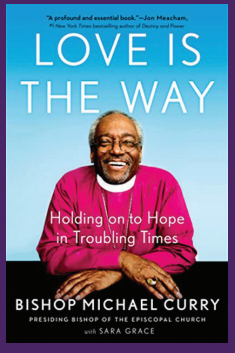
This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer (Civil Rights and Struggle)
by Kay Mills

Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision (Gender and American Culture)
by Barbara Ransby

Books for Children and Young Adults:

The Story of John Lewis: A Biography for Young Readers, by Tonya Leslie
March, by John Lewis and Andre Aydin
Let the Children March, by Monica Clark-Robinson
Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down, by Andrea Davis Pinkney

CBF Book Club 2021-22

We're excited to announce selections for this year's book club. With new subjects, great authors, more comprehensive reading guides and Fellowship-wide virtual events. We invite you and your congregation, Sunday school class or small group to join us as we read and learn together.

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