

Review of *God's Long Summer* by Charles Marsh

1964 was a tumultuous year for the state of Mississippi. Violence was pervasive. Churches were bombed. Three Civil Rights workers were murdered. In his appropriately titled award-winning book, *God's Long Summer*, Charles Marsh offers a detailed, captivating, invigorating, and horrifying glimpse into the lives of five people who experienced that turbulent summer of 1964. The central figures of *God's Long Summer* include Fannie Lou Hamer, a sharecropper turned voting rights activist who loved Jesus, Sam Bowers, the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, Douglas Hudgins, an influential Southern Baptist pastor who refused to take a stand against white terrorism, Ed King, a white Methodist minister who campaigned to integrate local white congregations, and Cleveland Sellers, a young black college student who transformed into a militant black nationalist. The activism (or lack thereof) of all five men and women was deeply motivated by their strong Christian convictions. Each of these men and women, whether klansman, idealistic civil rights activist or black militant, shared a common Christian heritage and cited scriptural passages that each insisted gave a divine blessing to his or her cause.

Poor, black and uneducated, Fannie Lou Hammer had endured the burdens of white racism for forty-four years as a sharecropper living in the Delta of Mississippi. After listening to an inspirational speech on civil rights delivered by James Bevel, Hamer answered the "call of Jesus" which demanded sacrifice but promised freedom and empowerment. This spiritual awakening would ultimately thrust Hamer into the national spotlight at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City.

Marsh vividly depicts Hamer's journey and struggle for civil rights during that hot and long Mississippi summer of 1964. For Hamer, that struggle was the beginning of a New Kingdom with the resurrected and revolutionary Christ as the focus point. Hamer's courageous efforts were not without a hefty price. She lost her job. Her husband lost his job. And Hamer was severely beaten and tortured almost to the point of death. These tragic events did not silent Hamer's prophetic voice. Through her deeply held faith in God, Hamer was able to press on and continue the fight for civil rights. Despite the suffering that summer, Hamer knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God had been present in the struggle for civil rights.

Next, we are introduced to Sam Bowers, the Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Marsh describes Bowers as the "high priest" of the anti-civil rights movement. During the mid-1960's, Bowers was suspected of engineering at least nine murders, seventy-five bombings of black churches, and over three hundred assaults. Yet, like with Hamer, faith in God played a major role in Bower's life. Bower's believed that he had been called by God to eliminate the "heretics" or civil rights activists. An educated Klansman, committed Southern Baptist Sunday School teacher and defender of racial orthodoxy, Bowers militant language was filled with religious images ranging from the resurrected Christ to the image of Elijah resisting the prophets of Baal.

Unlike Hamer and Bowers, Douglas Hudgins refused to take sides in the struggle for civil rights. A prominent Southern Baptist and pastor of First Baptist Church of Jackson, Hudgins instead preached that the Gospel of Jesus Christ "has nothing to do with social movements or realities beyond the church; it's a matter of individual

salvation”(89). Can you give me two sentences or so on Hudgins relying on Mullins and use of Soul Competency here. Marsh argues that Hudgins’s deafening silence on civil rights allowed the “atmosphere of violence” created by Bowers and the KKK to persist.

Marsh concludes *God’s Long Summer* with the powerful narratives of Ed King and Cleveland Sellers. The results of a devastating tornado in Ed King’s hometown during his senior year of high school opened his eyes to the racial injustice endured by blacks. King’s newly found social conscious had profound religious sources. While a theology student at Boston University, King discovered a wide range of organizations exploring the intersections between faith and social justice. Committed to civil rights, King returned to Mississippi in hope of reforming the church. King sought to translate the idea of a beloved community into social reality.

Raised in a middle-class black family in South Carolina, Cleveland Sellers faith in Christ caused him to enter the fight for racial justice. Influenced by Stokely Carmichael, Sellers eventually gave up on his commitment to nonviolence and the beloved community and embraced a form of Black Power which purged the movement of white participation. After serving time in prison, Sellers returned to his childhood faith in the Episcopal Church and once again began to dream of the beloved community.

Charles Marsh’s use of primary sources to create such vivid and dramatic narrative accounts of these five figures makes *God’s Long Summer* a powerful read. His examination of how different interpretations of the Bible led to different reactions to the civil rights movement is an invaluable contribution to the study of religion and history? For those who enjoyed *God’s Long Summer*, check out Charles Marsh’s latest work, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today*.