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A Game-Changer during the Civil Rights Movement

When one looks at the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, one's eyes are automatically drawn to the First Amendment's most well-known attribute, the freedom of speech. Behind this attribute's shadow, one will discover the right to peaceably assemble. The right to assemble is often overlooked, but was an influential part of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. The civil rights movement was over a two decade period where African Americans spoke out against their unequal treatment in the the economic, political, and social spectrum. The right to peaceably assemble was the foundational tool used by African Americans during their fight for equality. This right raised public awareness, empowered influential leaders of the time, and led to the creation of landmark Supreme Court cases.

The freedom to assemble caught the eyes of many during the civil rights movement. Freedom of assembly is the right to hold public meetings and form associations without interference by the government. The society during the 1950s and 1960s was full of segregation. Every motel, restroom, school, restaurant, and mode of transportation separated the African American population to themselves. African American people used the freedom of assembly to express the opposition against the treatment they were experiencing. The most common form of assembly was sit-ins. Sit-ins were a nonviolent way to raise public awareness

to the social issues that towns and communities faced. African Americans had simple instruction, sit quietly and wait to be served; they received everything but service. Most likely, they were mistreated, beaten, or physically removed. Another form of assembly was protests. Civil rights activists would gather together outside both government offices or segregated public facilities to draw attention to the inequality. Some protests eventually turned into riots, people were arrested, and others even lost their lives. The constitutional requirement for assembly is that it be peaceful, but as tensions grew, many did not remain in that state.

Martin Luther King, Jr., is one of the most well-known leaders in the fight for equality. Martin Luther King was a Baptist minister from Georgia who eventually became the spokesperson for the African American people in the civil rights movement. King used his christian beliefs and non-violent actions to influence his position on segregation. He became a craftsman of the freedom to assemble, because King understood the significance of this quiet freedom. King encouraged his followers to approach adversity in a nonviolent way. The right to assemble without government interference allowed them to succeed. King also sought to end civil rights debate by assembling himself with the top government officials that understood his cause. King strategically used the freedom to assemble and nonviolence to make segregation laws look as bad as possible. For example, in 1963 children assembled and marched around Birmingham, and Southern residents erupted. Many children were attacked by dogs and had fire hoses used on them.

As tensions over the civil rights debate continued to rise, many landmark Supreme Court cases were created. African Americans continually united, no matter their age, size, or gender. For example, *Edwards v. South Carolina* occurred because of black assembly. One hundred

eighty-seven black students were convicted for peacefully assembling at the South Carolina Government. While the students were peacefully exercising their First Amendment rights, law enforcement told them to disperse. Their conviction of breaching the peace was confirmed by the state court, but the students wanted further review. The case was taken to the Supreme Court where the convictions were overturned; the students' constitutionally protected right to assemble was infringed upon. Another landmark case such as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, shows confrontation because blacks were assembling themselves at white schools. By assembling themselves at this very school, segregation of schools was later declared unconstitutional.

In conclusion, the right to peaceably assemble was a quiet freedom that spoke measures in the civil rights movement. This right raised public awareness, empowered influential leaders, and led to the creation of landmark Supreme Court cases. The protection to peaceably assemble allowed the civil rights movement to flourish. The civil rights movement would not have been the same without the freedom to assemble. As stated in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, we find the provisions of the First Amendment to provide "a government of the people, by the people, and for all people that call the United States of America home" (*Abraham Lincoln's Advice to Lawyers*).

Work Cited

Abraham Lincoln's Advice to Lawyers,

www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm. Accessed 7 January 2019.