Partners in Struggle
The Legacy of John Brown

Study Guide

Colleen Birchett, Ph.D.

New York Conference
United Church of Christ
5575 Thompson Road
DeWitt, New York 13214
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PREFACE

IN MANY WAYS, AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY is a continuously unfolding mosaic of intricately connected human designs and patterns. Individual stories contribute to the dynamic whole. The result is an expression of the awesome creativity of God. That is the focus of this four-part study. This particular series features Americans of European ancestry who partnered with African Americans in the fight for freedom and equality. It focuses on the intriguing beauty that these particular elements bring into this unfolding mosaic. The design of this guide allows readers to “exegete” the lives of John Brown, William Lloyd Garrison, Viola Liuzzo and three college students (Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman). It provides the opportunity for exploration, reflection, critique and dialogue.

This is the first in the series of standalone study guides, with each focusing on the life of a different person. These particular people were selected for study for their outstanding contributions to the abolition of slavery and to the mid-20th Century Civil Rights Movement. Each study contains background information, review, discussion, reflection questions, resources for further study, sample lesson plans for group study and a reproducible participant handout.

The sample lesson plans contain suggested activities for various time frames. The publications in the series can be used as texts for church school classes, small group studies, church-wide retreats and interfaith events. They can also be used for occasions such as Black History Month and Women’s History Month.
Partners in Struggle
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INTRODUCTION

IT WAS NOVEMBER 2, 1859. In the Charleston, Virginia courtroom that day, all eyes must have been on John Brown, as they carried him in on a pallet. Then he walked slowly and remained silent as they positioned him before the judge. With eyes swollen, and hearing impaired, he could barely decipher the words of the judge or understand those of the attorney sitting beside him. His attorney attempted to plead that Brown was insane, but Brown stopped him. He argued that he was indeed competent for trial. The judge repeated the charges: he had killed four people, four white and one black. He had conspiring with slaves to incite an insurrection. He had committed treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia and murder in the first degree.¹

The clerk asked the court why this person before them should not be sentenced. At that point, John Brown stood, put his hands on the table before him and slowly delivered the most famous speech by which he would be remembered (see side bar page 13). The judge then scheduled his execution for December 2.² Counting from the day of his preliminary hearing, he would spend 40 days in prison. In letters to his wife from prison, he compared himself to the Apostle Paul.³

For almost 200 years now, the image of the “insane” John Brown has circulated in popular media and textbooks. However, scholars have been combing through Brown’s letters, and contemporary newspapers, and have interviewed living witnesses, family members and close associates in an effort to uncover the “real” historical John Brown. Thus, a somewhat different profile has now emerged. – A John Brown who was struggling against a variety of systemic evils of his day. Eventually this brought him over into black abolitionist struggles, and culminated in his attempt to overthrow the slavetocracy. Several aspects of his struggle are particularly intriguing. For example, he
formed a national interracial network of financial support, and, at the
raid, both white and black, bound and free men and women came to
his assistance. Moreover, his rationale was based on his interpreta-
tion of the Bible. As Vincent Harding documents, in There is a River
the steady escalation of such revolts led to the outbreak of the Civil
War, and ultimately to the abolition of slavery.

**BACKGROUND**

Among the most interesting of the John Brown biographies are
those written at a time when family members and eyewitnesesses could
still be interviewed. Enabled by such scholars as W.E.B. DuBois and
William Connerly, Brown can now step onto the pages of history en-
gaged in a different light. He now surfaces engaged in a perpetual fight
against the rich on behalf of the poor and elements of the embryonic
“middle class”. This seems to have been the case long before he
turned most of his attention to the issue of slavery.

Brown had told relatives that actually his earliest encounter with
slavery was when he was twelve years old. He met a young African
held in bondage on an aristocrat’s plantation. The landlord had wel-
comed Brown into his parlor, and had praised him for riding over 100
miles through the wilderness in his job as a shepherd. Then the land-
lord and his relatives began to beat the half-naked boy with farm im-
plements. The boy was without a family and at the mercy of the
master. Brown remembered asking himself at the time, “Is God their
father?” Then he expressed his resistance to what was taking place by
openly relating to the slave as an equal.

Brown had also told associates about an encounter with racism
at their Congregational church in Franklin, Ohio. The church required
slaves and free “colored” people to sit near a door away from other
parishioners. At one church meeting, Brown’s father mentioned his
disapproval of this policy. At the following worship service, the Brown
family volunteered to give up their seats so that the Black people pres-
ent could sit among parishioners. Following the service, a deacon con-
tacted the family and “admonished” Brown’s father. The same deacon
sent a letter that terminated the family’s memberships. Brown de-
scribed his father as white with anger. After that, John did not join a
church until 1846, when he joined the Sanford Street “Free Church”
in Springfield, Illinois, a church organized by African-American abo-
litionists. His surviving children told interviewers that throughout the years, in spite of not belonging to a church, Brown still insisted on nightly family Bible readings. Moreover, his speeches and letters over time, contain theological reflections on his various actions.

Biographers such as W.E.B. DuBois portray the adult John Brown moving from industry to industry, in a quest for economic survival. At the same time, he can be seen trying to dismantle institutional structures that allowed the rich to exploit both the poor and the developing “middle class”. He conducted this fight in a 19th Century economy that was moving from subsistence farming to cash crop farming and on to one that was to depend on manufacturing. Such paradigm shifts were known to put the poor at a disadvantage. It was also expanding from local to national to international markets. Pro-slavery forces struggled against anti-slavery forces to protect regional interests. It is in this context that Brown worked as a tanner, then land speculator, postmaster, woolgrower, stock raiser, shepherd and farmer.

An example of Brown’s struggle on behalf of the emerging middle class was during the 1840’s. It was against wool manufacturers on behalf of shepherds and woolgrowers. There, In Springfield, Massachusetts Brown conducted petition drives for the U.S. government to install tariffs to protect wool sales of local farmers. He tried to convince these local farmers to improve the quality of their wool, so that they could raise the price on sales overseas. However, he met resistance on every front. Even after traveling overseas to negotiate with foreign wool merchants, Brown failed to change the system. This was so, in spite of losing nearly one million dollars in the process. By 1849, his Perkins and Brown Wool Commission operation had to close.

In Springfield, he learned more about the anti-slavery movement at Sanford Street church. He met leaders like Frederick Douglass, Martin Dulaney and Harriet Tubman and solicited their support for an armed revolt. He also sold the banned revolutionary publication, The Appeal, by David Walker. Then, in 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was passed – an act that allowed citizens to arrest any black person suspected of being a runaway slave. In response, Brown organized the “League of Gileadites” (based on the biblical place name, Gilead). League members successfully resisted any attempt to force anyone to return to the South. By the time that this League was operational, Brown heard from his family in Kansas, that what were called “Border Ruffians” were threatening their lives.

Eventually he answered “the call” to Kansas, finding himself in
the midst of what was really a “proxy war” between pro and anti-slavery forces. By then he had already gone bankrupt, had lost family members, and had moved around the country for economic survival. The “Border Ruffians” threatening his family were primarily from Missouri. They had moved into Kansas to chase out anti-slavery settlers. They wanted to make Kansas a slave, rather than a free state. This was in reaction to the new Kansas Nebraska Act that had nullified the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The Missouri Compromise had brought states into the union, labeled slave or free, based on the already existing ratio of slave to free states. However, the Kansas-Nebraska Act had nullified the Missouri Compromise by allowing entering states to vote their status as free or slave.

As the election approached, Brown’s family described violent clashes between Kansas pro and anti-slavery forces. Initially the anti-slavery settlers outnumbered the pro-slavery settlers. Then “Border Ruffians” entered the state and began harassing and killing anti-slavery settlers. By the time Brown’s family contacted him, the offenders had conducted a fraudulent election, and had installed “Bogus Laws” to control the movements of anti-slavery settlers. They ransacked an anti-slavery settlement called Lawrence, leveling a hotel and a newspaper office. The local press had celebrated these events and had celebrated that pro-slavery Senator Preston Brooks had openly caned anti-slavery Senator Charles Sumner on the floor of the U.S. Senate.

Brown’s family near Lawrence had informed him that five pro-slavery men had threatened to kill them unless they left Kansas immediately. In reaction, John Brown, with a band of antislavery men, traveled to Kansas to the settlements of the five offending men and killed them with swords. Following this massacre, Brown moved around the country again, collecting money and other support for his future raid on Harper’s Ferry. Biographers say that, during these days, he also consulted with black leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Martin Dulaney, and various ministers. He studied the Jefferson County, Virginia section of the Underground Railroad and attended abolitionist conventions. At the home of Frederick Douglass, he drafted a “Provisional Constitution” to establish the alternative state government that would support the Movement. Frederick Douglass did not approve of the plan, calling it a suicide mission. However research by Hanna Giffert, suggests that Brown received enough support from among black people in Jefferson County (both free and enslaved) to begin executing the plan. His first step was to seize weapons from
the Federal armory at Harper’s Ferry. The goal was to first free the slaves in Jefferson County, then throughout Virginia, and eventually throughout the United States.

This area seemed ideal to begin the revolution. There, by 1830, Black people, free and slave, were 31% of the population. However, laws heavily regulated their activities. They could not vote, but had to pay taxes. They could not organize schools, and no black preachers could preside over black congregations there. In spite of these laws, it was from there that Black people were known to have fled into Maryland, Philadelphia, New York and Canada on the Underground Railroad. Brown used these facts to try to convince black leaders that he would get enough of the support he needed from black people there for the revolt.

There are still conflicting accounts of the actual number of black people who participated in the Harper’s Ferry raid. DuBois reports that there were at least 314 slaves and 50 free blacks. Giffert says that slaves had various roles: assisting at the firehouse where the weapons were stored, protecting the cache of weapons, guarding the prisons, transporting messages arms from the Kennedy Farm to the firehouse, carrying messages to other places, spreading the news and just gathering at the scene. DuBois reports witnesses saying that the mountains were full of Brown’s men.

There are also conflicting estimates of how many died, from 17-27. However, only ten are estimated to have lived with John Brown at the Kennedy Farm where he managed the logistics of the raid. There were also rumors that Harriet Tubman had helped by coming to the area to help deliver slaves through the “Great Black Way” near the Appalachian Mountains. The actual raid began on October 16, 1859, and ended on October 18, when U.S. Marines surrounded Brown at his fort. They broke down the door with sledgehammers and battering rams. He was executed two months later, on December 2.

John Brown is still considered a controversial figure. Many believe that the “jury is still out” regarding the actual merits of his role in American and African American history. Theologians, for example, still ask whether his war met the criteria of a just one. Historians still ask whether his actions actually helped or hurt the abolitionist cause and what was the actual extent of Black community support. People still ask whether his work was really that of a solitary mad man. Finally, ethicists ask whether there are any moral implications of his life for current and future activists.
BIBLICAL PARALLEL

John 2:14-16
(See also: Matthew 21:12-16, Mark 11:15-18, Luke 19:45-48)

14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the moneychangers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.” (New Revised Standard Version)

Anyone gathering among the peasants in the Southern outer ring of the Jerusalem Temple that day might have been thinking that things had certainly changed, and might not have liked the changes. The most striking and controversial one would have been the presence of the still new marketplace. It would have been widely known that Caiphas, the high priest, whom Rome had appointed, had installed it there around 30 C.E. No longer was this marketplace (The “Hanuth”) located across the Kidron Valley on the Mount of Olives. No longer did this Southern section of the Temple have much space for teaching and learning of the Law. Instead, merchants now sold sacrificial animals in it. This meant that actually, it was the merchants, rather than the priests, who now controlled whether given animals met the specification of the sacrifice laws. Moreover, coins used in the exchanges had first to be translated into Roman currency – currency that carried the face of the emperor and faces of foreign deities. Peasants in particular might have been afraid to raise their voices against these practices, feeling that doing so might put their lives in danger.

Fear of debt bondage might have been on nearly every peasant’s mind that day. Most were already paying Temple taxes, Roman taxes and unpredictable costs of the sacrificial animals. If anyone owed money to the merchants for the animals (as so many peasants did), s/he would have known that Temple personnel were keeping records of such debts. Most peasants gathering there waiting to purchase animals, might have been brooding, feeling that their very sense of personal holiness was now under the control of the Roman Empire and the mercantile elite.

When Jesus practically razed the Southern wing of the Temple that day, the peasants might have become ecstatic!!
QUESTIONS

FOR REVIEW

■ How do images you once had of John Brown compare with images of him in the above essay?
■ What paradigm shift was occurring in Brown’s environment?
■ What paradigm shift was occurring in Jesus’ environment?
■ In John Brown’s last speech (see below), what biblical references did he use to explain what he had done? Do you agree or disagree with the way he uses these passages?

FOR DISCUSSION

■ Who were the “least of these” (Matthew 25:35-45) in each of these stories?
■ Does the Augustinian quote (see the side bar) apply to either of them?
■ Does the quote of Thomas Aquinas apply?
■ Do these two “wars” meet the requirements of a “Just War”? (See the “Just War website below).
■ Is there any significance in the fact that Brown formed interracial partnerships for this struggle?
■ Was John Brown a Christ figure?
■ What impact did Brown have on American and African American history?
■ If Malcolm X, and Dr. Martin Luther King had held a joint consultation with John Brown before he headed for Harper’s Ferry, how might the discussion have gone? (Feel free to insert the Malcolm and/or King of your choice into the conversation – any given phase of their respective ideas about war and race relations. Feel free to consult the video clips below.)
■ What might have happened if they had invited Walter Wink into the conversation? (See excerpts from Wink’s video clips below.)

FOR REFLECTION

■ What theological principles can you draw from these two stories?
■ What contemporary applications can you make?
■ What personal applications can you make?
"We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace. Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace." — St. Augustine, Ep. ad.Bonif.clxxxix.

“In order for a war to be just, three things are necessary. First, the authority of the sovereign by whose command the war is to be waged...Secondly, a just cause is required, namely that those who are attacked should be attacked because they deserve it on account of some fault...Thirdly, it is necessary that the belligerents should have a rightful intention, so that they intend the advancement of good, or the avoidance of evil.”

— St. Thomas Aquinas The Summa Theologica Part II

“Had I interfered in the manner which I admit, and which I admit has been fairly proved (For I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of the witnesses who have testified in this case), had I so interfered on behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends, either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children or any of that class and suffered and sacrificed what I want in this interference, it would have been all right and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.

This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament. That teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to “remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.” I endeavor to act up to that instruction. I say, I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done as I have always freely admitted I have done on behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I submit; so let it be done!”

— John Brown’s Last Speech, November 2, 1859
APPENDIX

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Websites

John Brown’s Provisional Constitution
http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/johnbrown/brownconstitution.html

The Idea of a Just War: An Online Discussion
http://www.timothyarcher.com/kitchen/?p=5485

Slavery in New York
http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/about_exhibit.htm

Anti-Slavery.com
http://www.antislavery.org/english/what_we_do/our_history.aspx

The Underground Railroad

Underground Railroad Sites in New York
http://people.hofstra.edu/alan_j_singer/Gateway%20Slavery%20Guide%20PDF%20Files/1.%20Introduction/4.%20Introduction/5.%20UGRR%20WEB.pdf

David Walker’s Appeal

YouTube

Bleeding Kansas, Behind the Legend (3:59)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYpcyS48xqE

West Virginia Public Broadcasting, “Harper’s Ferry and John Brown’ (26:46)
http://www.youtube.com/v/1I4BftXQhUk&fs=1&source=uds&autoplay=1

John Brown Assessed 150 Years After Slavery (3:48)
http://www.youtube.com/v/e1OFdpUsO8w&fs=1&source=uds&autoplay=1

Orson Wells reading John Brown’s Speech at Sentencing (4:00)
http://www.youtube.com/v/yxvw-M3LTM&fs=1&source=uds&autoplay=1

Choir of Trinity College of Cambridge, singing “John Brown’s Body” (2:50)
http://www.youtube.com/v/q-E-ffXl2Uk&fs=1&source=uds&autoplay=1

Pete Seeger singing “John Brown’s Body’ (2:55)
http://www.youtube.com/v/jso1YRQnpCl&fs=1&source=uds&autoplay=1

“John Brown’s Body” by Tough Guy (9:56)
http://www.youtube.com/v/Ax7KjLUO8tw&fs=1&source=uds&autoplay=1
Violence vs. Non-Violence

Dr. Martin Luther King, “Why I Am Opposed to the Vietnam War” (23:00)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b80Bsw0UG-U
Malcolm X, “You are Afraid to Bleed” (5:20)
http://www.youtube.com/v/Zn0vHMlavTc&fs=1&source=uds&autoplay=1
Walter Wink, “Non-violence for the Violent”, Parts I-IV
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gC8pffvX1to (8:11)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUc3lAhJs8c&feature=related (9:23)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UejcCTSwJ6I&feature=related (8:40)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9buysvm0SGE&feature=related (9:23)

PBS

“Midnight Rising” Explores Life, Legend of John Brown (8:05)
http://video.pbs.org/video/2167849906
“Slavery by Another Name” (:30 promo, to be released February 13, 2012)
http://video.pbs.org/video/2185408208

History Channel Trailers

“Amercia, the Story of Us” (4:34)
“John Brown’s Raid” (1:38)
http://www.history.com/videos/john-browns-raid#john-browns-raid

Motion Pictures About John Brown (on DVD)

“Seven Angry Men”, 1955
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048602/

“Sante Fe Trail” 1940
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0033021/


END NOTES

1 Connelly, 367. 
2 Connelly, 368. 
3 DeCaro, 280. 
4 Hinton, 249 as cited in Geffert, 261. 
5 DuBois, 27. 
6 DuBois, 34, 89; Sanborn, 106. 
7 Connelly, 357. 
8 Dubois, 32. 
9 DuBois, 63-67. 
10 Connelly, 102; DuBois, 101-102. 
11 DuBois, 39. 
12 Connelly, 48. 
13 Connelly, 157. 
14 DuBois, 137-8. 
15 Connelly, 152. 
16 DuBois, 128-129, 149. 
17 Giffert, 595-598. 
18 Giffert, 598. 
19 Connelly, 349-353; Giffert, 596-600. 
20 Chilton, 24. 
21 Chilton, 24. 
22 Chilton, 24. 
23 Chilton, 25. 
25 Exodus 30:11-16. 
26 Chilton, 25, Oakman, 259. 
27 Chilton, 26. 
28 Seeley, 268, Pinfield, 27. 
29 Chilton, 25, Oakman, 259 – 266. 
30 Chilton, 27. 
31 Connelly, 367. 
32 Connelly, 368. 
33 DuBois, 27. 
34 Connelly, 357. 
35 DuBois, 63-67. 
36 Connelly, 152. 
37 DuBois, 128-129, 149. 
38 Connelly, 349-353; Giffert, 596-600. 
39 Chilton, 24. 
40 Chilton, 24. 
41 Chilton, 24. 
42 Chilton, 25. 
43 Oakman, 261-265. 
44 Chilton, 25, Oakman, 259. 
45 Chilton, 26. 
46 Seeley, 268, Pinfield, 27.

NOTES