

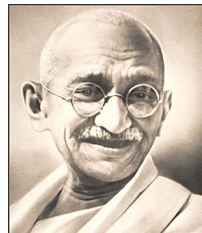
GROWING Together

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GANDHI AND THE POWER OF TRUTH

Non-violence. Civil disobedience. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American civil rights movement, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and the fall of South African apartheid: these movements and heroes of the 20th century have changed our world. Looking back at them we see that they 'fit' with the gospel message, and in that sense are profoundly Christian. Yet the concepts and the example that lies behind them came to us from an Indian lawyer named Mohandes Gandhi – known to the world as Mahatma – Great Soul. Gandhi's movement of non-violent civil disobedience became the force which finally dislodged the British from India.

Gandhi's story is well known. He was educated in the traditions of both East and West. He knew many missionaries, but quipped one day that he would have become a Christian – if he had ever met one. Gandhi did acknowledge that he owed his best thought to the New Testament on one hand and the *Bhagavad Gita*, Hindu classical scripture, on the other. Christians cannot claim Gandhi as 'theirs', but perhaps neither can orthodox Hindus. Gandhi observed many Hindu forms – living in an ashram, wearing traditional dress, fasting and meditation, but he also challenged many givens of Hindu faith and society around gender and caste. He wanted to build an independent and democratic India where all faiths and races could live together, a desire which led to his assassination at the hand of Hindu extremists. Nevertheless, his concept of civil disobedience opened up new vistas of hope for the Indian people, and was soon adopted by oppressed peoples in many places.



The heart of Gandhi's non-violence was his belief in '*satyagraha*' – literally 'truth-power'. When someone pursues a 'true' (or righteous) goal, by 'true' methods, and with a 'true' heart with pure intentions, a power is released which defies logic. Perhaps this is what St. John is getting at when he speaks of 'doing the truth'.

Gandhi stressed that all three elements are needed before *satyagraha* can work. He insisted especially on the purest motives and attitudes in those who desired to take part in his acts of civil disobedience. The goal was freedom from colonial rule. The method was non-violent action – for example, his great march to the sea to make salt (salt was a British monopoly and its manufacture was strictly protected). But what of the intention? His actions were opposed by police and soldiers armed with *lathees* (long sticks for beating opponents). Gandhi would say that unless you could face the man wielding the *lathee* with nothing but love in your heart, you should not take part in the action. He took very seriously Jesus' instructions to love your enemies, do good to them and pray for those who persecute you (Matt 5). When your heart is in that state, then *satyagraha* flows through all your actions. Gandhi's astonishing successes appear to demonstrate the power of truth.

Sometimes it takes someone who stands outside the tradition of Jesus to see Jesus clearly and apply his message. Christians owe a great debt to Gandhi. Well may African-Americans and South Africans, among many others, rise up and call him blessed. Gandhi has recalled for us a profound insight of our faith. As it says in the Gospel of John, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free".

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