

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# The 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing

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*In the 1950s and 1960s the American people, backed by civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., were speaking out against racial inequality and discrimination. In 1954 the Supreme Court ruled the separation of black and white children at school as unlawful in the Brown v. Board of Education case. While the ruling was met with resistance in many Southern white communities, many African Americans saw the case as a stepping stone to ending other racial inequality problems, and it eventually sparked a series of non-violent protests carried out by black communities that would continue for over a decade. The protests triggered outrage among police and many white community members, and soon some areas (mainly in the South) were experiencing frequent crime and violence on both sides. As you read, identify evidence that shows how Americans viewed racial discrimination differently in the years following the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing.*

- [1] In the 1950s and 1960s, racial conflicts were a big problem in Birmingham, Alabama. A lot of people thought of it as the most racist city in America. Twenty-one bombs were set off at African American churches in the city between the years of 1955 and 1963. People gave the city the nickname “Bombingham.”

Many civil rights leaders were trying to help fix the problems in Birmingham. One of those leaders was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The activists worked to plan protests and events. The people who went to the protests often got arrested. The police in Birmingham did not allow the protests to happen without trouble.



*["Congress of Racial Equality and members of the All Souls Church march in memory of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing victims on September 22, 1963"](#) by Thomas J O'Halloran is in the public domain.*

Civil rights leaders and community members went to the 16th Street Baptist Church to plan meetings. It became well known as a place where the activists met.

## Sunday Morning

Until Sunday, September 15th, 1963, no one was killed in the bombings. On that day, the 16th Street Baptist Church became the site of another explosion.

- [5] At 10:22 a.m., the teenage Sunday School Secretary got a phone call. The person delivered an ominous<sup>1</sup> message, just saying “Three minutes.” Less than one minute later, the bomb went off. 15 sticks of dynamite had been hidden under the church steps.

1. **Ominous (adjective):** suggesting that something bad is going to happen

The explosion hit a back room in the church. Inside, five young girls were getting ready to sing in the church choir. Witnesses said the bomb caused the girls to fly through the air “like rag dolls.” The blast also tore a seven-foot wide hole in the wall. In fact, the explosion was so powerful that a man who was driving by was blown out of his car.

The bomb killed four of the girls: Addie Mae Collins, 14; Carol Denise McNair, 11; Carole Robertson, 14; and Cynthia Wesley, 14. The fifth girl, Sara Collins, was badly injured. Pieces of glass had flown into her eye and blinded her. Beyond the five girls, the explosion injured 19 other people.

Black people in Birmingham reacted quickly to the bombing. Many people rushed to the church to help look for bodies in the church’s ruins. Hundreds of others stormed the city. They burned buildings that white people owned and protested violently. It took 300 extra state policemen to help Birmingham’s police get the city back under control.

## Public Support

The funerals for the four girls got a lot of attention around the U.S. Thousands of people, including more than 800 clergymen<sup>2</sup> of all races, attended. Martin Luther King was also there and spoke at the event. He encouraged people to keep working towards civil rights. He hoped that if they worked hard enough crimes like the bombing would no longer happen.

## Investigations

- [10] The investigation of the crime was done poorly and took a long time. At first, the state of Alabama offered a \$52,000 reward for the bomber’s arrest. Twenty-five FBI agents came to work on the case. Part of what made the investigation hard was the lack of evidence. A lot had been destroyed with the church. Finally the FBI discovered that the bombers were four members of the Ku Klux Klan. Their names were Thoman Edwin Blanton, Jr., Herman Frank Cash, Robert Edward Chambliss, and Bobby Frank Cherry. Unfortunately the case was closed in 1968. The men were never arrested. Problems within the FBI’s administration were to blame.

## Late Arrests

There was a new Attorney General in Alabama in 1971. He started looking into the case again, digging up old evidence. His efforts helped convict the group’s leader. Robert Chambliss was sent to jail in 1977.

The rest of the men were free until 2000. Then the FBI reopened the case. Bobby Cherry had died, but Thomas Blanton and Herman Cash were convicted in 2002.

## A Call to Action

The bombing at 16th street was terrible. But it was also very important. People were able to see how bad racism really was. The event was part of why President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964. After the act, it became harder to treat people poorly based on the color of their skin.

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2. referring to pastors, priests, and other religious leaders

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## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which statement best summarizes the central idea of the text?
  - A. There were a lot of bombings in Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1950s and 1960s.
  - B. Churches were often used as meeting places for civil rights leaders to organize and hold events.
  - C. The deaths of four young girls in a church bombing in Birmingham sparked massive protests against racial discrimination and brought racism to national attention.
  - D. Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights act in 1964, which made discrimination against people for their race, gender, religion, or nationality illegal.
  
2. In paragraph 5, the author explains that “At 10:22 a.m., the teenage Sunday School Secretary got a phone call. The person delivered an ominous message, just saying ‘Three minutes.’” Why is this detail important?
  - A. It tells us what time the bomb went off.
  - B. It implies that there were children in the church at the time.
  - C. It shows that the people in the church didn’t have any real warning about the bomb, and didn’t have time to get out.
  - D. It means the bomber made a mistake by setting off the dynamite too early.
  
3. PART A: Which statement best describes the effects of the four girls’ deaths?
  - A. There was a very small funeral service that only the girls’ families attended.
  - B. Many people attended the funeral, and Dr. King gave a speech telling people to keep working for civil rights.
  - C. Many people went to the girls’ funeral, but most Americans didn’t care that they had died or that the church had been bombed.
  - D. The funeral was used as an opportunity for Martin Luther King Jr. to tell the community to stop fighting for civil rights or else more people might get hurt.
  
4. PART B: Which quote from paragraph 9 best supports your answer to the previous question?
  - A. “Thousands of people, including more than 800 clergymen of all races, attended.”
  - B. “Martin Luther King was also there, and spoke at the event.”
  - C. “He hoped that if they worked hard enough crimes like the bombing would no longer happen.”
  - D. “The funerals for the four girls got a lot of attention around the U.S.”

5. How does paragraph 13 impact the author's main message?
- A. The paragraph proves that the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing was important for making the Civil Rights Act happen.
  - B. The author reminds the reader that the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing was a tragic incident.
  - C. The author informs the readers that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made all racism in America illegal in the United States.
  - D. The author explains that President Lyndon Johnson made a personal commitment to end racial discrimination in America.
6. According to the text, what impact did the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church have on the city of Birmingham and on the United States in general?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Why did the bomber call the church before the explosion happened? Do you think it was to give warning, or do you think it was to make people afraid?
2. After the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, some African Americans reacted to the violence by destroying buildings and starting fires. In your opinion, is it ok to react to violence with more violence?
3. Why is it important that the funeral drew national attention to civil rights and the problems in Birmingham? How does making more people care about a situation impact the outcome? Cite information from this piece that supports your answer.
4. What is an example of discrimination? Have you ever felt like you were discriminated against? Do you think racial discrimination is still a problem in America?
5. We learn that Alabama's new Attorney General opened the case against the bombers back up in 1971. Why do you think it took so long for the case to be re-opened? Do you think it was important to the community in Birmingham that the bombers were finally put in jail? Why?