



# Will Campbell

**Biographical Timeline:** **July 18, 1924**, born Will Davis Campbell in Amite County, Mississippi, one of four children, to Lee Webb Campbell and Hancie Ted Parker Campbell; grows up in Liberty, Mississippi; attends Amite County public schools; **1931**, joins East Fork Baptist Church and is baptized in Amite River at the age of seven; **1940**, preaches first sermon; **1941**, ordained at the age of 17 at the East Fork Baptist Church, with the ordination council consisting of his Uncle Luther, his Grandpa Bunt, a cousin, and a country preacher; **1941-1942**, attends Louisiana College; **1942**, enlists in the Army, serving for three years as a medical corpsman, attaining the rank of sergeant; **1946**, marries Brenda Fisher with whom he will have three children (Webb, Bonnie, and Penny); **1946**, attends Tulane University; **1949**, earns A.B. degree from Wake Forest; **1952**, earns B.D. degree from Yale University Divinity School; **1952-1954**, serves as a Baptist pastor in Taylor, Louisiana; **1954-1956**, serves as Director of Religious Life at the University of Mississippi; forced to leave because of his ardent support of civil rights; **1956-1963**, serves as race religious consultant and member of the National Council of Churches field staff; works closely with Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, Andrew Young, and Kelly Miller Smith; **January 1957**, included by Martin Luther King, Jr. at the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Council at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia; **September 1957**, escorts black students who integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas; **1961**, accompanies and counsels Freedom Riders in Alabama in their efforts to integrate interstate bus travel; **1962**, publishes *Race and the Renewal of the Church*; **1963**, his declarations regarding radical equality among the races at the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago earns him stern disapprobation by the National Council of Churches; accompanies King and other SCLC leaders in the Birmingham campaign of marches and civil disobedience; **1963-1972**, from his home base and farm in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, serves as the only white member of the Committee of Southern Churchmen and as “preacher at large;” with James Holloway, creates *Katallagete*, a journal of religious opinion and social commentary (which will last until 1990), with contributors like Thomas Merton, Vincent Harding, Daniel Berrigan, Jacques Ellul, Walker Percy, Reinhold Niebuhr, Robert Penn Warren, Christopher Lasch, and John Howard Griffin; creates a ministry to members of the Ku Klux Klan; offers his “backhouse” as a refuge for draft resisters and black dissidents; **1973-1976**, establishes Southern Prison Ministry in Nashville, Tennessee; helps to create the Southern Coalition on Jails and Prison, a broad network of compassionate support and legal assistance for death row inmates across the southern United States; preaches, as a “preacher without a pulpit,” whenever and wherever asked; begins ministry to country western musicians in Nashville; **1977**, publishes *Brother to a Dragonfly* (an autobiographical account of the Civil Rights Movement and an elegaic remembrance of his brother Joe), which earns the Lillian Smith Prize, the Christopher Award, and a National Book Award nomination; **1982**, publishes his first novel *The Glad River*, which wins a first-place award from the Friends of American Writers; other works are awarded the Lyndhurst Prize and an Alex Haley Award; **1996**, serves as “roadie” and cook for Waylon Jennings’ band on tour through Tennessee and Mississippi; **2000**, receives National Endowment for the Humanities medal from President Clinton; Alabama Arts Council releases PBS documentary “*God’s Will*,” narrated by Ossie Davis; **2002**, 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Brother to a Dragonfly* is released, with a new forward by President Jimmy Carter; **May 2011**, suffers a stroke and moves to Richland Place Health Center, Nashville, Tennessee; **June 3, 2013**, dies peacefully at Richland Place, in Nashville, Tennessee, surrounded by family; **June 22, 2013**, memorial service held at St. Stephen Catholic Community, Mt. Juliet, Tennessee; eulogized by John Egerton; burial in East Fork Cemetery, East Fork, Amite County, Mississippi; **September 11, 2015**, University of Mississippi, names gathering place near its chapel in Oxford “*The Will Davis Campbell Plaza*” in honor of his years of service there as Director of Religious Life.

Will Campbell was one of the most powerful witnesses for the Christian faith which the North American scene ever beheld. Born in the deep South, baptized in the backwaters of Mississippi, seasoned in the U.S. Army, educated at a Connecticut

seminary, matured in a university chaplaincy, Campbell became arguably the most important white man in the modern civil rights movement.

During tumultuous times in the South, he offered a ministry of daring witness and courageous presence.

Campbell was with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and among his closest associates mourning his tragic death on the day of his assassination at the Lorraine Motel.

In Little Rock he provided shepherding for school girls as they sought full educational enfranchisement.

He ministered at the hallowed locales of the civil rights movement – Birmingham and Montgomery and Nashville and Memphis – when the social trajectory of the United States and the souls of its citizenry were being irrevocably transformed.

In a critical moment of great sorrow, he discovered the bedrock reality of his own summary of the gospel: “We’re all bastards but God loves us anyway.”(1)

In the depths of the Depression Campbell learned from his parents what he calls “the radical faith of Jesus.” Every night in their little frame house in rural Mississippi, his parents would read to their brood of four from the family Bible and say prayers. Throughout his entire growing-up years in Mississippi, his father would utter the same table grace three times a day, no matter how sumptuous or meager the meal: “O Lord, look down on us with mercy, Pardon and forgive us our sins, Make us thankful for these and all other blessings, We ask for Christ's sake. Amen.” “Those words made a deep impression on me and I began early to take them to heart. As the words took flesh it was in relationship to other human beings. We lived in one of the most rural and presumably

most racist counties in the nation. How then did I grow up to give my entire adult life to the struggle for racial equality and reconciliation? I learned lessons, lessons centered around my father's table and hearth. Not mandated prayers in Caesar's schoolroom." (2)

From his family of origin and his extended family Campbell learned about racial equality and the need for forgiveness and reconciliation. In World War II he saw the horrors of war and the deep interior wounds which accompanied soldiers on their return home. In his pilgrimage throughout the South, he struggled for racial equality and reconciliation and was converted in the process to a new awakening about divine grace for his life and for all others.

In 1983, Campbell applied his writing skills to an explication of The Lord's Prayer as a foundational source of spiritual inspiration for those who say they are following the ways and will of God through Jesus.(3)

Campbell's counsel and friendship were treasured by a host of ministers, seminarians, lay people, professional musicians, intelligentsia, prisoners, ex-prisoners, in addition to the civil rights luminaries with whom he was on a first-name basis. All of these were members in what he called "The Neighborhood." (4)

Though he denied the connection, many regarded Campbell as the model for the cartoon character "Rev. Will B. Dunn" in the comic strip Kudzu drawn by Doug Marlette.

All along, perched in a cabin-office nestled on his 35-acre farm in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee, Campbell was available for friendly conversation, scriptural commentary, prayerful support, and loads of grace-tinged, hilarity-tinted, and sometimes moonshine-soaked stories. Countless people share a common bond of admiration and

affection for “Brother Will.” For them he was sacred kin, the kind of uncle whom you may not see very often but upon whom you know you can always depend for compassion and wisdom. God’s will worked itself out in extraordinary fashion in “God’s Will.”

## Praying with Will Campbell: Suggestions for Use

- Day 1 Recall the nightly practice of Bible readings and prayers by Will Campbell’s family in Mississippi. What are the rituals your family practices? If such a regular routine seems foreign to your sensibilities, can you imagine giving something like a nightly reading and regular prayers a try this week? This night?
- Day 2 Pray today by recalling how you learned about justice, forgiveness and reconciliation. Give thanks for those whose teachings and examples are now embodied in your own commitments to justice, forgiveness and reconciliation. Call out their names, one by one, with honoring recognition and gratitude.
- Day 3 Pray today by considering your enemies. Choose one enemy in particular and imagine that you and your enemy are seared before the throne of God’s grace. Now recall Campbell’s summary definition of the gospel: *“We’re all bastards, but God loves us anyway.”* Let whatever emanates from your soul come forth – as an expression of despair, as release from the fatigue of enmity, as a cry for consolation, as an expression of rage. Whatever comes, let it come. And know that you are being held, as your enemy is, in the hollow of God’s gracious hand.
- Day 4 Today, pray by reciting The Lord’s Prayer, all the while pondering how this prayer means “God has come on earth.”
- Day 5 Pray today by recollecting those on whom you depend for counsel, comfort, and encouragement, those who are part of your “Neighborhood.” Name them one by one and utter the following prayer: “My God, I am blessed, aren’t I! Thank You for Your generous provision.”
- Day 6 Remembering the progress that has been attained in civil rights and race relations, give God thanks today by uttering a time-honored prayer by an old preacher of the South: *“Dear Lord, we ain’t what we ought to be, and we ain’t what we want to be, but thanks be to Thee, we ain’t what we were.”*
- Day 7 Despite the tragic circumstances that continue to bedevil God’s children – inadequate education, continuous wars (and the machinations that support their

continuance), lack of potable water for one-fourth of the world's population, ignorance that stands for too much public policy in too many nations, abiding bigotry toward those who are different – offer a prayer of anticipation and hope today, signing off your prayer, as Will Campbell does all of his personal correspondence: “*With Hope!*” (5)

#### NOTES

- 1 Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1977), p. 220.
- 2 Will D. Campbell, “A Personal Struggle for Soul Freedom,” *Christian Ethics Today*, Issue No. 4, December 1995
- 3 Will D. Campbell, *God on Earth: The Lord's Prayer for Our Time* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983)
- 4 See Will D. Campbell, *The Glad River* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982)
- 5 Personal experience.

#### FOR FURTHER READING, STUDY, AND REFLECTION

- Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1977), p. 220.  
Will D. Campbell, *The Glad River* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982)  
Will D. Campbell, *God on Earth: The Lord's Prayer for Our Time* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983)