

## At the crossroads of freedom and equality

Written by Timothy Houston  
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February is black history month and this year's theme is "At the Crossroads of Freedom and Equality: The Emancipation Proclamation and the March on Washington."

2013 will mark the 150 anniversary of Abraham Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation, and the 50 year anniversary of the historic march on Washington culminated by Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream speech". These two events are very significant in that they were major crossroads that forever changed the landscape of blacks here in the United States.

The Emancipation Proclamation was signed on January 1, 1863. It was the initial step in setting the United States on the path of ending slavery. Although it was a wartime measure issued by President Abraham Lincoln to weaken the southern states ability to wage war, it only freed a few slaves. Its real power was that it fueled the fire of the enslaved and their advocates to fight for freedom. The plight of blacks in this country had reached the highest office. Abraham Lincoln's declaration acknowledged the epidemic of black self-emancipation that was in full force by those such as Harriet Tubman and other freedom fighter. A powerful blow had been struck against slavery.

Fredrick Douglass further championed this cause and he predicted that the war for the Union became a war against slavery. Many other smaller blows were struck. Those in bondage increasingly pour into the camps of the Union Army. They were boldly fighting on their own behalf by reclaiming and asserting self-determination. Neither 400 years of slavery, nor the fear of death could deter them from this cause. The Emancipation Proclamation served notice that a full-scale attack on dismantling slavery had begun.

In 1963, a century later, America stood at another crossroads, and once again other smaller blows had been struck by those who would not be deterred. Nine years earlier, the U.S. Supreme Court had outlawed racial segregation in public schools. This was a small victory that was overshadowed by the nation's unwillingness to commit itself to equality of citizenship. President John F. Kennedy agonized over the legal and moral issue of his time. Like Lincoln before him, national concerns, and the growing impetus of black mass mobilization efforts, overrode his personal reluctance toward demands for black civil rights. Once again, the oppressed refused to be denied.

The battle for equality was and in full force, and this force had its direction and champion. On August 28, 1963, hundreds of thousands of Americans, blacks and whites, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, marched to the memorial of Abraham Lincoln, the author of the Emancipation Proclamation. It was on this occasion that a new champion for justice, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his celebrated "I Have a Dream" speech. Just as the Emancipation Proclamation had recognized the coming end of slavery, the March on Washington announced that the days of legal segregation in the United States were numbered. A pivotal blow for civil rights had been struck.

With the reelection of President Obama, we are again at another crossroad. This is not the time to sit on the sidelines waiting to see what he will do. No one person can make a movement. Every hand, heart, back, and brain is needed. You will need to be involved in continued battle for equality. It has and always will be the will of the people that cannot be denied.

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*Timothy Houston is an author, minister, and motivational speaker who is committed to guiding positive life changes in families and communities. To get copies of his books, or for questions, comments or more information, go to [www.tlhouston.com](http://www.tlhouston.com).*