

Moral Mondays movement connects with populism of the election season

by [Jeremy Borden](#) in the [Apr 13, 2016](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* The picture might have seemed like something out of a Bernie Sanders rally.

Thousands of people spill into a city square in Raleigh, North Carolina, on a cold February day, calling for rights for women and gay and lesbian people. They thunder that minorities are being systematically disenfranchised. They demand access to affordable health care.

Then out walks the most anticipated speaker of the day. He is a black man, and around his neck is the starched white collar of a pastor. When he speaks, white and black and Latino and Asian heads nod in agreement.

This is no sermon. Nor is it a rally like any other held this election season. It is a movement that is trying to reshape how southerners, in particular, see politics.

The speaker, William Barber II, calls it “fusion” in a nod to the diverse coalition the movement has brought together. But at its heart, it is an attempt to reframe the politics of morality in America, seizing it from conservative evangelism and arguing that care and compassion for all Americans is the essence of morality.

Especially this election season, its success points to potentially significant changes percolating across the United States.

Senator Sanders has enjoyed more success than any pundit predicted by promoting a similar message in a more secular way. Taken together, the two movements hint at how visions of morality in America are potentially evolving. Millennials accept same-sex marriage, want big government, and “are no less convinced than their elders that there are absolute standards of right and wrong,” according to a seminal 2010 Pew Research Center study.

It is these views of morality that the fusion coalition and Sanders have tapped. Barber thinks the North Carolina movement can grow to other southern states. There will be challenges. But his eclectic mix of races, religions, and rights groups

might provide at least one glimpse of the future of the American left.

His message seems perfectly calibrated for the moment.

“We should be concerned . . . when politics is more a struggle over money and manipulation than a struggle over ideas,” he told the crowd at the February rally, catching the populist mood of this election. “Politicians want us to be slaves to their decisions without citizens having the ability to register their discontent at the ballot box.”

Barber, who also leads the North Carolina NAACP, said addressing race is a vital first step to addressing other social issues. Underlying his work is the idea that framing issues through a moral prism makes them far more powerful and universal than framing them politically.

The goal is nothing less than a “Third Reconstruction” in the South, he said, following the initial post-Civil War Reconstruction and the midcentury civil rights movement.

“America says that its purpose is to establish justice,” he said. “To be conservative—if conservative means ‘to hold onto the essence of’—to be a true constitutional conservative means you would be in every fight about establishing justice and promoting the general welfare because you say you believe in the Constitution.”

The movement calls for evaluating each policy with the question, “Is it morally defensible?” Barber said.

The Moral Mondays events at North Carolina’s state capitol have drawn crowds in the tens of thousands. The question is how exportable the movement is to the rest of the South.

“North Carolina is a lot more progressive than Alabama,” said Bernard Simelton, who leads Alabama’s NAACP chapter.

North Carolina residents more easily see the benefits of Moral Mondays activism, especially for low-income people, Simelton said.

“People in Alabama, they are still of the opinion that ‘I may be dirt poor, but if a Republican says this is not good for me, then this is not good for me,’” he said.

Barber's often-caustic tone also could turn off moderates who otherwise might be attracted to his message. He famously said of Tim Scott, the first black senator elected in the South since Reconstruction, who is a Republican: "A ventriloquist can always find a good dummy."

"He is seen as too radical," said Paul O'Connor, a longtime North Carolina state politics reporter and columnist. "And of course it's race-based that he's seen as radical. You've got to get moderate to moderately conservative rural white people to see what the Republicans are doing. They're not going to listen to a fiery black man saying that."

For the movement to gain traction outside North Carolina, Barber and those who help spread the message will have to win over voters who haven't associated their values with the left in a generation.

"The question is, can that message come out and get less politically strident Christians to vote Democratic in key elections?" said Scott Huffmon, a political scientist at Winthrop University in South Carolina.

The Civitas Institute, a conservative think tank in the state, called Barber's protests "Money Mondays" and cataloged the state and federal grants his congregation, which belongs to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and affiliated organizations have received.

Barber smiles at the criticism. His church, Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina, has used its money to leverage state and federal grants to help seniors, former felons, the incarcerated, and the homeless, he said. On a recent Sunday, the pastor proudly showed off homes that the church's development organization helped build in an effort to move people out of poverty.

The resonance of Sanders's message shows the appetite for a uniting progressive force, said Bob Zellner, a longtime civil rights organizer. But Barber's morality-based argument will resonate even more broadly, he said.

"We have two forces trying to pull the country in opposite directions: one trying to pull the country toward division and violence, and the other by Dr. Barber . . . to build bridges and connections rather than moats," Zellner said. "We're going to take back the evangelical community, we're going to take back the moral high ground, we're going to take back the flag, and were going to bring it back to real American

forces that believed in brotherhood and sisterhood, not division.”

*This article was edited on March 29, 2016.*