

PROPHETS OF CULTURE

Cultural analysis from a theological perspective

Saturday, July 16, 2016

Reflections on Black Lives

Last night, two young Black Christian leaders from our community came to visit us. They joined a steady stream of young people who've come to our home in the last few years seeking answers. One brother was primarily concerned about unjust policing in our city, the other with the high crime rate in his neighborhood.



Both of these issues have affected them and their friends deeply. My two young brothers expressed their frustration with measures that often lack practical application, be they protest or prayer. They were united by their larger concern over the lack of discipleship, the absence of applied biblical principles, and a prophetic void – all three, they sensed, were at the heart of their frustrations. They expressed a profound sentiment: “Black Lives Matter’ won’t matter to us until *all* Black lives matter.”

They also came with a question, “What do we *do*?”

Most folk acknowledge that there are at least two versions of “black lives matter.” For the Christian, making some sort of distinction makes it possible to participate in the movement for Black lives without compromising fidelity to Scripture. Not long ago, the two versions were distinct. They’ve since become so intertwined that it’s worth revisiting how they’re framed and perceived, and how they might be evolving.

On one hand, “black lives matter” (all lower case, “blm”) is a *truth*. This truth encompasses the healthy concern for matters that touch Black lives – criminal justice reform, racial justice, just policing, better community relations, crime reduction, urban homicide rates, discipleship, mass incarceration, abortion rates, poverty reduction, education, employment, ethnic reconciliation, accurate representation of our history, etc.

I affirm and engage this *truth*, and have encouraged and trained other Christians to do the same as a part of God’s plan of individual and cultural discipleship. I find these affirmations and concerns have no conflict with Christian conviction. I’ve built decades of personal and academic ministry on this truth – that Black lives do, indeed, matter to God, and therefore are of immeasurable significance and worth.

On the other hand, “BlackLives Matter” (capitalized, “BLM”) is an ideology with clearly stated goals and presuppositions. I would go so far to say that the original “BLM” ideology, which started as a rally cry and grew into an entity, has given rise to a cult with its own doctrines and demands for faith. It now extends *beyond* the original entity, blending with other belief systems in a syncretistic manner as it exports its own iconography, its own language, and its own heroes for veneration.

Spiritual Elite

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Recommended Resources

Books:

Free at Last? - The Gospel in the African American Experience

Going Global: The Role of the Black Church in the Great Commission of Jesus Christ, also available [here](#).

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Honestly, I am more concerned about this syncretistic subculture than I am about the original "BLM." It is an infection that is finding its way into Christian communities. Some things I have observed about this subculture among Christians:

- 1) It comes dangerously close at times to binding consciences by conflating holiness or true Christianity with grievance on the singular issue of police brutality as defined by "BLM."
- 2) It flirts with binding consciences by subtly emphasizing public proclamation of commitment to "BLM" as evidence of commitment to Black people — ignoring the myriad of other issues that Christians might be addressing in their own personal and cultural spheres.
- 3) It borrows a language of exclusivity that suggests some Christians enjoy a deeper knowledge of reality than others (e.g., "woke" vs. "not woke," commonly accepted by many in the movement for Black lives as an "existential state of being"). This transfers into the experiential, as when a Christian "gets woke," one is now an acceptable part of a spiritual elite. This kind of language unwittingly draws unnecessary dividing lines in the Body that Christ died to unify.

I question the underpinnings of such language; it creates division based on a temporal standard for inclusion. Those within the Body who express concern or disagreement with this doctrinaire approach, or who lack public displays of support for the "BLM" movement, can have their authenticity questioned, be rejected, or ostracized. Surely, just policing is a legitimate pursuit for the Christian activist. However, it almost seems that for some, advocacy for just policing alone is becoming the Gospel, and awareness of the issue its Pentecost.

Others have already pointed out that "BLM" *the entity* holds presuppositions regarding human flourishing that are at odds with much of biblical truth. In our land of free thought and speech, it is their Constitutional right to hold these beliefs. Their de-centralized form of leadership, however, has opened the movement to chaos and uncontrolled rogues who aim to dehumanize others under their banner, even at the most peaceful of protests. Couple this deficiency in the leadership's structure with their presuppositions of what constitutes human flourishing, and the Christian is presented with an obvious dilemma that cannot be glossed over with persuasive, yet simplistic pleas for "solidarity around a common cause."

It has become increasingly apparent that the differences between these two — "blm" and "BLM" — do not co-exist as "tension to be embraced," as it is touted by staunch "BLM" advocates in the Body of Christ. Rather, it seems for a number of Christians, the two are incompatible and for some, the two present an irreconcilable confusion. These concerned brothers and sisters should not be judged or marginalized for the courage of their convictions.

As for using the hashtag, it's not essential to doing work that affirms Black lives, nor is its use essential in order to work alongside others who advocate for criminal justice reform and just policing. For example, a cursory glance through the Equal Justice Institute's Twitter feed this year shows no consistent use of the phrase or the hashtag, even as they similarly pursue their fine work of criminal justice reform.

We need to walk in the wisdom of Jesus. He is truly the Messiah, yet he did not identify with that title when he was in Judea. Why? Because the term "Messiah" was grossly misunderstood by the Judeans.* The same applies to the confusion surrounding the "BLM" banner.

'Where Is the Christian Voice?'

Not long ago, our colleague and brother Anthony Bradley argued that we don't have to bend "BLM" *the entity* into something it wasn't originally designed to be; that is, into something distinctly Christian. I agree with him. We also don't need to rely on it to accomplish cultural and social change. Christianity should never be subject to anyone else's movement.

In the same article Bradley asked, 'Where is the Christian voice in the conversation?' Since his article was published, a number of young Christians have developed organizations willing to take on today's issues without co-opting the language of "BLM." Under their own unique titles,

Colloquium: "Culture Matters: Biblical Reflections on Going Global"

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a number have organized and are developing belief statements outlining parameters of agreement. I believe this will help them greatly as they network to tackle today's issues.

Belief statements are helpful in that they display care for the Body of Christ, for society, and for individuals who wish to collaborate by building parameters and defining expectations. Such statements combat confusion in two ways:

- 1) They show respect for the Constitutional right of the original "BLM" *entity* to have their own stated goals, beliefs, and intellectual property – even if it disagrees with "blm" as *a truth*.
- 2) They help define and articulate the Christian's unique perspective on human flourishing.

In our collaborations, there's no need for either defensive posturing or for blind affirmation of the value systems involved. In love for man and faithfulness to God, we can show respect to the platforms of those who may disagree with our foundations. It's telling, however, if they do not respect our foundations or our commitment to them in return.

I'm also encouraged that these same grassroots organizations are springing into action around just policing and beyond, to all the issues that touch Black lives and into all spheres of human flourishing. They are arming themselves with a robust theology that can accomplish much, without compromise. Likewise, my two young friends left our home last night with a resolve to begin something of their own. It is up to God whether or not these movements will grow beyond their local significance. Either way, my wife and I are personally committed to nurturing these initiatives into something tangible and lasting.

Grateful

I would be remiss if I did not mention those who have labored long in our communities, schools, courts, in politics and in our legislature, and in our general society for years, bringing the biblical Gospel to bear on the value of Black lives. Many who are new to today's advocacy tend to ignore this presence, stating that "the church was not there" on these matters.

This is not accurate history.

I know many of you...some are younger, some are older. I'm a witness that your advocacy for Black lives – including just policing – began long ago, and continues a legacy started by those who came before us. You may not have been organized into movements, but you were there. I'm grateful for your faithfulness in the day to day, and I'm here to remind you your work does not go unseen.

Caution

Unless a distinction is clearly made between the two – "blm" and "BLM" – in the minds of the general public and the larger Christian community, or unless organizations issue public statements that distinguish between the two, I find myriad reasons why it's unwise for Christians to identify with or protest under the "BLM" banner since other less compromising options are available.

For the Christian activist, a distinction also needs to be made between *reform*, *revolution* and *revolt*. Reform movements seek to improve the existing order. Revolution movements, *if they are committed to truth*, seek to abolish the existing order and replace it with a better one. Revolt movements just seek to tear down the existing order. History teaches us that without a better replacement as a goal, the result of a *revolt* is often a new order that is worse than the one that was demolished. The inconsistencies, lack of accountability caused by its decentralized leadership, and moral murkiness of today's "BLM" leave it vulnerable to becoming merely a *revolt* movement.

I have further concerns that the gains and strides made by those who champion "blm" will be eclipsed by the unchecked and counterproductive activities of "BLM." As a result, I've spent a good portion of this year advising those who ask me about the movement to use caution in affiliating with "BLM" ideology, or when marching under the "BLM" banner.

Conclusion

I've only touched on a few concerns here, but I'm open to dialogue further about the issue.

In closing, I don't seek to bind anyone's conscience; my hope – as it's always been – is to see young men and women wisely build solid platforms on which they can generate tangible changes for our communities, without doing harm to conscience or conviction.

Notes

*The Samaritan 'woman at the well' – in spite of her theological confusion – had a more correct understanding of "Messiah." Hence Jesus, in this context, did not hesitate to use this language familiar to her and identify himself as the "Messiah."

Posted by Carl F. Ellis, Jr. at [11:15 AM](#)

19 comments:



30 Years of Transformation Saturday, July 16, 2016

Thank you for your thoughtful post, Dr. Ellis. I'm an InterVarsity staff working with Urban Programs, and would love to hear you--or be directed to where you've already written on--interact with any tensions you see between Christian faith and critical race theory. In the midst of entering into the activism of this generation in the spirit of Jesus' call that we live as good news to those on the margins, how do you see critical race theory assisting our understanding of godly opposition to systemic power abuses, and are there any ways you see it in conflict with a godly pursuit of biblical justice? If it's better to just email me personally, you can do so at scott.hall@intervarsity.org

Reply

Replies



Carl F. Ellis, Jr. Thursday, September 14, 2017

Hi Scott, my latest blog, "Fine Dining or Dumpster Diving" mentions Critical Race Theory. It is not a deep analysis of this theory, but I point out why it is "not radical enough to carry the freight of" the issues of racism.

Reply



Unknown Saturday, July 16, 2016

Brother Carl. I am deeply appreciative of your voice and life. Your book "Free At Last" is a treasure of wisdom that will reach generations To come once people get "woke" to its relevance. Thank you for this post and insight.

Reply



Unknown Saturday, July 16, 2016

Doc Ellis, I'm grateful for your wisdom. Your words give us lyrics to a song that many of us have been singing in our heads. Now, we can speak aloud with gospel clarity and consciousness! Love and appreciate you much, Sir!

Reply



Pastor Jerome Saturday, July 16, 2016

Thx Dr. Ellis for your insightful post. I hope to dialogue with you more as we seek to engage urban youth for the long term.

Reply

Unknown Sunday, July 17, 2016



Stay on the wall Brother Carl. Will help disseminate the post which certainly, as a black evangelical commentary, contextualizes, clarifies, and calls serious followers of Christ to take every thought and make it captive to obey Christ and Christ alone (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:5).

Reply



Curt Day Sunday, July 17, 2016

Carl,

I think you need to write more on BLM and listing the specific principles you agree and disagree with. For those who don't know, their principles can be found at <http://blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles/>

My question is do we need a distinct Christian voices within the movement? I ask because to believe so, to me, seems to imply that we cannot work side-by-side with BLM and that we cannot support those BLM principles that would be inappropriate for the Church but not for society.

To the concern expressed that Black Lives Matter won't matter until 'all black lives matter,' we should note one of the principles of the BLM states:

We are guided by the fact all Black lives, regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, economic status, ability, disability, religious beliefs or disbeliefs, immigration status or location

Finally, the distinctions made between revolt, revolution, and reform are very good. I would modify the one statement made about the need to have better replacements. The anarchist in me would modify that statement to say that without a firm commitment to participate in creating a new order, what replaces the old order either imitates or is worse than the old order. This was true with the Russian Revolution of October, 1917 and it became very evident with the Arab Spring movement in Egypt. The problem is that the masses usually have the energy to revolt, but they do not have the same interest in doing the necessary work that creates a new order. And without the participation of the masses in creating a new order, we are simply changing the first and last place teams rather than changing the game.

Reply

Replies



Carl F. Ellis, Jr. Sunday, July 17, 2016

I already included a link to the "guiding-principles" of "Black Lives Matter." The Bible affirms the humanity of all the groups mentioned on BLM's website. The difference is in how human flourishing is framed. Acknowledging those differences should not be a hindrance to working side-by-side with others at clearly defined points of agreement. This is how I advise people about involvement with the "BLM" movement.

When I was a student under Francis Schaeffer, I learned the concept of "co-belligerency." In my understanding, co-belligerency means that we can work "side-by-side" with others while staying under our own banner. This merely adds protection for the integrity of everyone's vision involved.



Curt Day Sunday, July 17, 2016

Carl,

What you call co-belligerency I call celebrating our agreements. And the more agreements we can celebrate, the more opportunities we will have to share what the Scriptures say. At least that has been my experience.

Reply



Unknown Sunday, July 17, 2016

Wow. Thank you sir!! God has given you gifts that can only be expressed in one phrase. "Look at God." Lol Much love

Reply

**Food For Your Soul** Sunday, July 17, 2016

Dr Ellis, thank you. Your voice on these issues are refreshing and necessary. Please continue help us think clearly and biblically as it relates to matters of race and justice.

Reply

**Unknown** Monday, July 18, 2016

Keep up the good work. You (personally, the church and the whole of the USA) are in our prayers. Yes, Schaeffer's co-biligerency ideas have been so helpful to us over the years (both in the pro-life cause in Ireland and in Muslim-Christian efforts to fight AIDS in Africa). We in Northern Ireland have been through similar divisions to what you are (still) struggling with - Protestant (unionist) / Catholic (nationalist). It has taken years to heal but by the grace of God and in answer to prayer and by the hard work of Evangelicals (often behind the scenes) bridges have been built between our communities here. One measure that has helped us enormously was the disbandment of our former police force (RUC) followed by equal recruitment into the newly formed Police Service of Northern Ireland to reflect the community it is serving. I know that something like this has happened in some parts of the US but it needs to happen all over. This will meet resistance no doubt, as it did here, but we are all reaping the benefits today. Send me an email and we can talk more - sidjgarland@gmail.com

Reply

**Unknown** Monday, July 18, 2016

One day as African-Americans continue to move into reformed and other healthy biblical movements we will have more guys like Carl. More sages to speak into confusing moments. Until then I just need to say how much you are valued Carl. Since Rasool and I were at Howard University we have looked to you to be a voice of reason as we attempt to contrexualize the scriptures in an urban context. Because of your trusted voice....I read this article like marching orders. I praise God for your wisdom. Blessings....- james@bridgechurchnyc.com

Reply

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Reply

**Jordan** Wednesday, July 20, 2016

Dr. Ellis, thank you for your wise words. As you continue to engage this conversation, I'd love to get your perspective on the seeming silence of many white Christians to "black lives matter" until "Black Lives Matter" arrived and almost forced a response.

Reply

Replies

**Jason Jones** Monday, January 09, 2017

I can't speak for the whole of white men but I know there are many who grew up like me. I grew up in places where I did not witness the kinds of racial discrimination and brutality that I have since learned is a reality. The systemic and institutional racism taught me that what I was hearing in the recent media wasn't true. It has taken some digging, studying, and soul searching to learn the truth yet so many around me still sit as I did not too long ago, like a horse running a race with blinders on. I've since learned the pieces of our history that have been left out, the misrepresentation of many great black leaders. As a Christian my heart now cries out to the Lord for the oppression that I now know exists. It isn't easy coming to this reality because the white men still running with blinders on still believe they are being lied to. They truly don't have any malice in

their heart. On the day they learn the truth they will repent immediately. I'm sure there are also many white leaders in this nation that aren't blind, they are driven by an oppressive leadership style but the corrupt leaders who turn a blind eye are different from the white congregations who haven't yet been enlightened to the truth. I hope Dr. Ellis will also respond to your post because he has been gifted with an exceeding amount of wisdom from the Lord and his writings have been a powerful influence. Mine is but a limited perspective but I hope understanding my perspective will help you to understand the depth of the problem just as I have had to learn from a different perspective.

Reply



Connally Wednesday, July 20, 2016

Could you share, specially, any names/places of the other groups you are referencing?

"I'm also encouraged that these same grassroots organizations are springing into action around just policing and beyond, to all the issues that touch Black lives and into all spheres of human flourishing."

That would be really helpful.

Thanks,
Connally Gilliam

Reply



PastorS Thursday, July 21, 2016

Your entry combines both the rhetorical power that calls attention and action to the issues that are real with the nuances necessary that address honest questions Christians would ask that want to be a part of the solution but cannot in good conscience before God and His Word embrace all the BLM requires to be judged authentically involved. Thank you Carl for helping the white members of body of Christ to not conflate the two - blm and BLM - and then used that conflation as a pretext for invalidating gospel driven attention to issues that afflict the lives of black people, other minorities and ultimately all lives. God bless you!

Reply



Unknown Tuesday, June 09, 2020

Thank you so much for writing these words four years ago, Dr. Ellis. They are as helpful and relevant as ever.

Reply

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