

The Movement for Black Lives vs. the Black Church

Lawrence T. Brown

Several times over the past three years, the Black Church and the Movement for Black Lives have clashed, revealing a peculiar incongruence. Movement for Black Lives activists, advocates, and agitators are not only pushing to hold police officers and officials in the criminal justice system accountable for deaths of Black victims; they have been pushing the Black Church and Black clergy as well.

On August 22, 2014, after the killing of Mike Brown at the hands of Officer Darren Wilson and during the ensuing protests, several high-profile figures showed up to Ferguson, Missouri, to provide support and bear witness to the protests, which erupted with the rallying cry “Hands up, don’t shoot!” But when the Reverend Jesse Jackson—an oft-celebrated Civil Rights leader—arrived in Ferguson, he was yelled at and scorned. A voice punctuated with anguish told him bluntly:

We ain’t seen you. When you gon’ stop selling us out, Jesse? We don’t want you here in St. Louis. . . . Naw ain’t no “wait a minute, brotha.” . . . This is REAL. We activists out here. We activists out here, brotha. This is real. We don’t want you here. We don’t want you here, brotha. (Quoted in NewsOne Staff 2014)

Several months later, Movement for Black Lives activists from Ferguson wanted to be heard at the Justice for All march held in Washington, DC, on December 13, 2014. The National Action Network, the NAACP, and the National Urban League organized the march. But although Ferguson activists had been cen-

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tral to the march, Rev. Al Sharpton refused to give the young activists the microphone. Undeterred, activists commandeered the microphone, and Johnetta Elzie was briefly allowed to speak (Savali 2014). However, the aftermath of the event exposed a critical divide between the insurgent Movement for Black Lives and the old-guard element of Civil Rights organizations.

On April 5, 2015, Easter Sunday, the group Millennial Activists United (MAU) held actions at three Black churches in Ferguson to seek more movement participation from Black churches as a part of the #ReclaimHolyWeek protest actions (HolyWeekofResistance 2015). They stood outside the churches, silently holding signs, hoping to “spur our people into taking direct action in the communities they pray for” (Rivas 2015). But at one church, they were shunned and police were called. In their statement, MAU and LaTosha Baker pronounced their rationale for “bring[ing] our burdens to your front door”:

Over time the battle for Black Liberation has evolved greatly, and so too has its voice. However, Black Churches across America, as a whole, have been largely silent in supporting the ongoing struggles against racism & systematic oppression. The time to use your collective voices in service for those without a voice is at hand. (Quoted in MAU 2015)

Later in the year, on October 19, 2015, Black Lives Matter activists in Los Angeles confronted Mayor Eric Garcetti at a meeting held at a Black church—Holman United Methodist Church. As the meeting progressed, Black Lives Matter advocates began to feel that its structure was designed to mollify them and stifle their legitimate concerns. After becoming increasingly frustrated, the activists began to make a move toward the mayor, city officials, and police representatives who were on the rostrum. The meeting was swiftly ended as police ushered the mayor away. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Rev. Kelvin Sauls, who was presiding over the meeting, stated:

We were here to have a constructive and civil meeting with decency, so we can all examine what are some of the obstacles and opportunities in South Los Angeles. We certainly understand the rage because of the challenges in South L.A., but amidst that, we do not want to violate our own integrity. (Quoted in Jamison and Mather 2015)

In May 2016, activist PFK Boom excoriated Jamal Bryant, pastor of Empowerment Temple, as seen in a video that has gone viral (Baltimore BLOC 2016). While Bryant stood mute or responded in hushed tones, Boom boomed. He blasted the pastor, denouncing him for broken promises to the family of Tyrone West, who had been killed at the hands of Baltimore police officers and an officer working for Morgan State University. After being berated for several minutes,

Bryant turned and walked away. A few weeks later, Boom and Bryant would reconcile with the help and mediation of the Nation of Islam's student minister, Carlos Muhammad.

Why have activists, advocates, and aggrieved agitators in the Movement for Black Lives protested against prominent figures in the Black Church so vociferously and boldly? Hasn't the Black Church been a stalwart presence in the Black Freedom Movement historically? Should such disruptive behavior be condoned? Is it behavior that Jesus himself would condone?

One reason activists, advocates, and aggrieved agitators in the Movement for Black Lives have upbraided the Black Church and its clergy is that many in the movement perceive the Black Church as either sitting on the sidelines or, even worse, a buffer for or an accomplice in the systems of oppression leading to homicides at the hands of police. But when one examines the landscape of the Black Church, many of the most prominent and well-known Black churches have offered *some* response to the state violence that snatches Black lives and to police officers who are usually not even indicted, much less convicted. For instance, on December 14, 2014, many churches hosted and held a Black Lives Matter Sunday at the direction of Charles E. Blake Sr., presiding bishop of the Church of God in Christ, Incorporated. At the Potter's House in Dallas, Bishop T. D. Jakes (2014) offered up a special Black Lives Matter prayer at a church service. In 2015, West Angeles Church of God in Christ members produced a compelling Black Lives Matter play (Coleman 2015).

As mentioned earlier, however, not all Black clergy have been viewed as welcome participants, including clergy such as Jackson, Sharpton, and Bryant. Activists, advocates, and aggrieved agitators in the Movement for Black Lives have criticized these figures for what they perceive as a desire for publicity and personal aggrandizement. There is often the sense that some Black clergy merely show up when the cameras are on and are not to be found if they are not leading the movement or the march of the day, as activists stated when Jackson went to Ferguson (NewsOne Staff 2014). Some feel that when the cameras are off, the clergy are gone.

To be sure, there are also activist clergy in many cities where Movement for Black Lives protests and disruptions have erupted. For example, Rev. Traci deVon Blackmon in Ferguson, Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou in New York City, Rev. Heber Brown in Baltimore, and Rev. Brenda Salter McNeil in Seattle have been heavily involved and authentically engaged in protests or responses to police brutality. But most actions in the movement have been led not by clergy but by people the Black Church often marginalizes. McNeil captured this sentiment in her initial interaction with Ferguson activists at Movement Day 2015 in New York City:

Unlike the Civil Rights movement of my day and many of our experience, this is not a movement growing out of the Church. This is not a

movement being led by faith leaders who have a theological input on what people are saying and doing. No, no, no. So I wanted to understand why don't they want our input, why aren't they concerned about what the Church thinks. And what I came to understand is they believe that we don't have relevance.

They said, "We don't like your hypocrisy. We don't like your misogyny . . ." ouch, "... we don't like your sexism, we don't like the way your inactivity keeps you silent, we don't like the way you seem to keep the LGBT community out. It seems as if you work harder to keep people out than to let them in." (Quoted in Blair 2015)

In contrast to the supportive efforts of some Black churches, other clergy in the Black Church have attacked the entire character of the Movement for Black Lives. On April 25, 2015, ordained minister Rev. Dr. Barbara Reynolds (2015) published an article in the *Washington Post* denouncing the methods and approach of the activists, advocates, and aggrieved agitators of Black Lives Matter. She writes:

The baby boomers who drove the success of the civil rights movement want to get behind Black Lives Matter, but the group's confrontational and divisive tactics make it difficult. In the 1960s, activists confronted white mobs and police with dignity and decorum, sometimes dressing in church clothes and kneeling in prayer during protests to make a clear distinction between who was evil and who was good.

But at protests today, it is difficult to distinguish legitimate activists from the mob actors who burn and loot. The demonstrations are peppered with hate speech, profanity, and guys with sagging pants that show their underwear. Even if the BLM activists aren't the ones participating in the boorish language and dress, neither are they condemning it.

The 1960s movement also had an innate respectability because our leaders often were heads of the black church, as well. Unfortunately, church and spirituality are not high priorities for Black Lives Matter, and the ethics of love, forgiveness and reconciliation that empowered black leaders such as King and Nelson Mandela in their successful quests to win over their oppressors are missing from this movement.

Here, Reynolds expresses a certain protest respectability and a wholesale disapproval of the actions and disruptions of the Movement for Black Lives, although many actions in the 1960s—such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) Freedom Rides and sit-ins or the SNCC/SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) crossing of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, or the March against Fear (co-organized by SNCC, SCLC, and CORE [Congress of Racial

Equality))—were all considered “confrontational and divisive tactics” to white supremacists in the Deep South. Like Rev. Sauls of Los Angeles, who desired “decency,” Reynolds called for “dignity and decorum.”

In her article, Reynolds also decries the image of today’s movement by remarking, “It is difficult to distinguish legitimate activists from mob actors who burn and loot”—as though Harlem did not riot in 1964, Watts did not burn and loot in 1965, and Detroit and Newark did not explode in 1967. Burning and looting took place throughout the 1960s alongside the Civil Rights Movement, culminating in the most devastating assemblage of urban riots, known as the Holy Week Uprisings, which occurred after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968. Her focus on “an innate respectability” of 1960s leaders like King or Mandela depends on a sanitized whitewashing of their images and dismisses their radical and often revolutionary stances. Further, Reynolds presumes that just because the spirituality of today’s agitators does not look like that of King, it is somehow flawed and not worthy of the Black Church’s support.

Other Black pastors go even further. Bishop E. W. Jackson, pastor and founder of Staying True to America’s National Destiny (STAND), derided the Movement for Black Lives in saying at the National Press Club on December 12, 2015: “Let me speak with this admonition. I don’t know everything they are saying, I know what I heard. With that proviso, what I have heard has not been good. What I have heard, to me, is divisive and demonic” (quoted in Smith 2015).

By and large then, though certainly not overall, Black pastors and churches have offered scripted support, tepid efforts, or outright antagonism to the Movement for Black Lives, especially when compared to the dominant presence of Black pastors and churches during the Civil Rights Movement. But even in the 1960s, the Black Church began to take a back seat when the Black Power Movement emerged—first with the armed self-defense group known as the Deacons for Defense in 1965. In 1966, the clergy leadership further declined with the ascendance of the radically evolving SNCC (which, with Chairman Stokely Carmichael, coined and advocated the phrase “Black Power”) and the founding of another armed police patrol and self-defense group, the Black Panther Party, in Oakland, California, in October 1966.

It is telling that although many Black residents are living in disinvested and redlined communities that are gripped by constant death and devastation, representatives of the Black Church have called for decency, dignity, and decorum. Even the Civil Rights Movement itself did not uphold the values of decency, dignity, and decorum. In fact, it employed tactics of disruption and militant nonviolent direct action to call attention to violent white supremacy and the structural violence of Jim Crow. As powerful as the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement were, they did not result in the end of white supremacy nor forestall Black despair. The three great civil rights bills passed by

Congress in the 1960s and signed by President Lyndon Baines Johnson (the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act) have been defanged, especially through federal government action or inaction, including the release of school districts from desegregation consent decrees, the institution of voter ID laws and mass poll closures, and the lack of enforcement of the mandate to affirmatively further fair housing. Supreme Court decisions rendered by the court of Chief Justice John Roberts have also played a major role in the rollback of civil rights legislation through pivotal cases such as *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* (2007), *Ricci v. DeStefano* (2009), and *Shelby v. Holder* (2013).

Hence, fifty years after the pivotal summer of 1966, Black Lives Matter activists and Movement for Black Lives participants are confronted with resegregating school districts, Black voter suppression, and continually disinvested, redlined Black neighborhoods. Whereas fifty years ago, many urban areas and their police forces were still segregated, today many have had or currently have Black mayors and/or police commissioners. Many urban areas also have a Black ministerial class that actively supports the local arrangement of power—what John Arena (2012, xxiii) describes in his book *Driven from New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization* as a governing coalition consisting of a “primarily Black public wing” and a “White corporate private wing.”

This governing coalition is committed to what Arena (2012, xxiv) describes as a “neoliberal urban entrepreneurial development model” that engages in the mass closures of Black public schools (Journey for Justice Alliance 2014), mass reductions in Black teachers (Rizga 2016), the demolition and/or elimination of public housing for low-income Black families (Goetz 2013), and the redevelopment of exclusive urban waterfront or downtown areas while disinvested, redlined Black neighborhoods continue to crumble (Johnson 2016). In short, this urban development model intensifies residential segregation and ignores the resegregation of our public schools (Hannah-Jones 2014) and the rapid closings of Afrocentric charter schools (Cohen 2016).

In many urban areas, the decency, dignity, and decorum of the Black ministerial class often provides cover for keeping segregationist policies. Rev. A. P. Jackson, pastor of Liberty Baptist Church in Chicago, illustrated this dynamic when discussing the involvement of the Black Church during the Chicago Freedom Movement in 1966:

[Mayor Daley] had a large number of ministers at City Hall eating from the king's table. You don't talk against the king when you are eating at his table. And quite naturally, when Dr. King came to Chicago these ministers were afraid of inviting Dr. King to their churches because they were afraid they would alienate the feelings of Mayor Daley. . . .

We were free of eating at the mayor's table. We had no fear of any reprisal coming from Mayor Daley because our church was independent. The membership of Liberty made sure that I was independent of any politicians, so we never accepted money from any politicians or anyone else. . . . So I could afford to have [Dr. King] come to Liberty because we were not afraid of any reprisal from Mayor Daley. (Quoted in Ralph 1992)

This indicates that Black ministerial leaders can be compromised or have their hands tied by their political connections, thereby effectively diminishing their likelihood of protesting urban regimes that proliferate racial inequality.

Confrontational and Divisive Tactics

The grandchildren of participants in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements have witnessed how ineffectual the Black Church has been in challenging racial oppression overall. Three regions where uprisings erupted—Ferguson/Saint Louis, Baltimore, and Milwaukee—are among the eight most hypersegregated metropolitan areas in the United States (Massey and Tannen 2015); their residents live in areas of concentrated poverty and misery, separated from resources and opportunity. Today's Black youth and the unchurched have witnessed the role that Black churches and pastors have played in supporting a politics of respectability—of decency, dignity, and decorum—even as white police officers can still kill an unarmed Black person and rarely be indicted or convicted. As the Rev. Dr. Leslie D. Callahan (2015) recounted her protest experience at the 2015 Preaching with Power summit in Philadelphia:

But most of the folk in the street weren't wearing a collar. Most of the folk in the streets weren't affiliated with a congregation. Truth be told, most of the folk in the streets had given up on church in general and the Black Church in particular. They had given up on the idea that we loved them and that we knew what it means that Black Lives Matter.

Black residents living in hypersegregated spaces have been treated with disrespect and disdain, covertly by systems and often overtly by police. Michael Brown's body lay in the street for four and a half hours in Ferguson while in Baltimore Freddie Gray went into the van screaming in agony and emerged on the verge of death with a severed spine and a crushed voice box. Sandra Bland was found dead in a Texas jail cell under highly suspicious circumstances. Movement for Black Lives participants—often responding to the acute trauma of homicides at the hands of those called to protect and serve—understand deeply how the politics of respectability have been deployed to stifle Black people's dissent against injustice: it demands redemptive suffering even as their dreams

are deferred and hopes are crushed. The uprisings ruptured the respectable responses to the status quo. In the face of police occupation and militarization, movement participants have shown a studied disregard for decency, dignity, and decorum in presentation as they are opposing systems and governing coalitions that are indecent, dehumanizing, and destructive.

Perhaps it is true, however, that the disruptive Movement for Black Lives offers the potential for transforming the Black Church in the United States in much the same way that the disruptive actions of Jesus offered moments of transformation for the Jewish synagogue in the midst of the Roman Empire. As Rev. Traci deVon Blackmon (2015) proclaimed at The Riverside Church in New York City on December 21, 2014:

When this super sweetening of the story happens, we miss the revolutionary nature of a God who is born, not as the son of royalty, but as the Afro-Semitic son of a poor, teenager mother living in a religiously conservative police state. Christ is born not as an affirmation of the status quo, but is born as a contradiction to the reigning thinking of an empire.

The Christian bible also shows Jesus displaying a predilection for disruption and shut-down protest methods. In the Gospel of John 2:13–17, Jesus finds money changers and people selling sacrificial animals in the temple. In his anger against the commercial activity taking place in this holy site, Jesus takes ropes and fashions them into a whip that he uses to drive animal sellers, money changers, and even the animals themselves out of the temple, turning over the tables where the transactions took place. This is clearly an act where Jesus is not comporting himself with decency, dignity, and decorum; instead, he uses “confrontational and divisive tactics” in order to stop the exploitation and oppression of the adherents to the Jewish faith. He arouses the ire of the Jewish ministerial class, who later seek to stymie his activity due to fear that the imperial Roman authority might respond to Jesus’s radical actions by threatening their own status (John 11:45–48).

Fifty-one years ago, in June 1966, Christian leaders helped ensure that such tactics were represented during the March against Fear. According to the autobiography of Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael), prominent Civil Rights activists met to decide whether to continue the march with the Deacons for Defense, the militant, armed self-defense group that had organized to repel Klan violence in the Deep South in 1965 (Carmichael and Thelwell 2003, 491–493). The activists debated whether the Deacons should accompany the marchers after activist James Meredith was taken down by a sniper’s bullets after originating the march in Memphis. After the heads of the NAACP and National Urban League voted against the Deacons and CORE and SNCC voted in favor, King—representing SCLC—broke the tie in favor of including the Deacons for Defense.

The Roots of Decency, Dignity, and Decorum

The ideal of decency, dignity, and decorum articulated by Black ministers in opposition to the Movement for Black Lives emerges from a distinctly Southern sensibility in Black Christian tradition. Although many of the Movement for Black Lives events chronicled here occurred in places like Los Angeles, Chicago, Ferguson, or Washington, DC, these cities still receive the impact of Southern Black Christian thought. Many Black Americans outside the South are either among or descended from the 6.5 million Black people who fled the South during the two successive Great Migrations between 1910 and 1970 (Schomburg Center et al. 2005).

I argue that the invocation to decency, dignity, and decorum emerges from three impulses: fear, many ministers' support of urban neoliberal regimes, and the marginalization of women and queer/LGBT persons. Fear of white supremacist violence—such as the more than one hundred collective white supremacist acts of massacres or destruction of independent Black economic districts from 1824 to 1974 (Hogan 2016) and more than four thousand lynchings from 1877 to 1950 (Equal Justice Initiative 2015)—contributed to many Black people leaving the Deep South (and other areas where destruction took place) and likely contributes to Black ministers' pleas for decency, dignity, and decorum in the face of current police brutality and state-sanctioned violence. This fear is understandable. It is the product of over 350 years of onslaught: slave trading, enslavement, forced breeding, rape, families being sold and split apart, and unrelenting terrorism during Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the New Jim Crow. This fear has been elucidated eloquently and insightfully in Arkansan James Cone's (2013) book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* and Mississippian Fannie Lou Hamer's (2011) speech "We're On Our Way."

The Black ministerial class has often supported the neoliberal entrepreneurial urban redevelopment model in cities across the United States, invoking the prosperity gospel and neoliberal logics to castigate lower-income Black people for their actions without accounting for the New Jim Crow context in which they live. As Lester Spence (2015, 25) writes in *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*:

Neoliberal ideas and policies are not simply produced and reproduced by whites to withhold resources from blacks. . . . Black elected officials and civil rights leaders reproduce these ideas . . . [such as] one that consistently posits that the reason black people aren't as successful as their white counterparts is because of a lack of hustle, is because they don't quite have the work ethic necessary to succeed in the modern moment.

Finally, the Black Church is notorious for preaching against women in leadership positions and against people who identify as LGBTQ. In contrast to past

Civil Rights and Black Power movements that foregrounded charismatic Black male figures, many protestors in the Movement for Black Lives are Black women or persons who identify as queer or LGBT. The traditionally patriarchal Black Church is reticent to accede leadership to Black women and LGBTQ persons. These factors are often the real motivations behind the Black Church's opposition to the Movement for Black Lives.

The Movement for Black Lives ruptures the fear, compromised leadership, and homophobia/transphobia exhibited by many of the Black ministerial class and much of the traditionally patriarchal Black Church as a whole. The insurgent and militant movement—which has witnessed uprisings in Ferguson, Baltimore, Baton Rouge, Milwaukee, and Charlotte since 2014—shows no signs of slowing down. In spite of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, many Black residents are still confronted with the intransigence of white supremacy in the United States. Hypersegregation and resegregation are wreaking havoc on Black neighborhoods via redlining, subpriming, predatory financial agencies, and the rising numbers of apartheid schools. Hyperpolicing proliferates in Black neighborhoods via militarized policing, stop-and-frisk tactics, police occupation, secret surveillance, and the brutal police killings of Black people that go unpunished and unchecked. It is in this moment that the Black Church's role is being critically examined. Will the Black Church and the Movement for Black Lives resolve their differences and intensify the struggle against white supremacy, or will Black activists fifty years from now be fighting the same battles as we are today?

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