

An Open Letter To White Christians

Monday, August 8, 2016, by Pastor Christopher Hopper

Dear White Christian,

I'm writing to you, specifically those who I'm pastoring within the locality of Jefferson County New York for whom the majority of my life has been dedicated to serving, in the hopes of accomplishing three primary goals. I don't expect everyone to be helped by this letter, nor those deeply saturated in years of media-endorsed rhetoric; your's is a longer road which only begins when you *unplug*. But I do trust that there are some who've felt a growing uneasiness over the widening gap between what we've believed in the past and what we need to believe moving forward. It is for you that I hope to offer a voice of reason, a glimmer of light in the darkness of negativity.

My first goal is to present alternate perspectives to the many given by the loudest voices within our white contexts; namely right-wing media outlets, and churches that have continually ignored Jesus-centric views on marginalized people groups. Statistically and behaviorally, the right is acting extremely unChristian for those who so adamantly claim to champion the ethical causes of Christ. Tragically, what I hear most are opinions and judgments coming from people who rarely, if ever, take into consideration the side of those they're deciding for. This mentality is a large part of what's gotten us here. It fails to embrace empathy, instead opting for self-justification at the expense of the marginalized, an action ultimately rooted in pride.

My second goal is to provide language with which to speak about subject matter that's largely outside of our purview. I believe there are many people who watch national events unfold who feel helpless in their ability to dialog about them. We're stuck with words like "frustrated" and "enraged," and would love to know how to express ourselves more thoroughly, more effectively. For you, may you find new vocabulary, new metaphors with which to explain the complex state of our world.

Lastly, I would like to offer up my recommendations for specific actions. There's nothing worse than reading someone's moving call to the streets only to be left on the curb

with nowhere to go. While I don't have the exhaustive list, nor even the best list, I do have a few ideas that I hope provoke others to move forward and add to an ever-growing wealth of shared strategy.

Problems always seem simple when we're far away. When I see someone bent under the hood of a car on the far side of a parking lot, I assume they just need some jumper cables. It's not until a mechanic gets up close that he or she can diagnose the complexity of a fuel sensor error and a clogged gas line. In order to understand the problems we're facing as a nation and as a church we must be willing to get up close and get messy. If not, we'll continue to misjudge what's really happening, settling instead for our own false narratives.

Getting Our Heads In the Game

I remember my high school soccer coach yelling at our team during a state finals game. "Get your heads in the game!" he roared at a halftime that found us losing to a team we would've beaten handily in any other situation. He rightly perceived that we were being thwarted by two issues, neither of which had to do with our actual opponents. First, we'd become so comfortable beating all the opponents of our past that we'd forgotten to play the opponent of our present. And second, we'd become comfortable playing on our home field, a statistic that bore up against our away losses. Our heads were in the wrong place in the wrong time.

Our senior pastor, Kirk Gilchrist, recently asked our church two serious questions. Why did the civil rights movement of the 1950s die out? He followed it with an even harder question: How was the white church complicit in its demise? If we can stomach a third question, I'd pose: What patterns of silence and inactivity of the 1950s and 60s are still present in our churches today?

These questions, if we'll let them, should drive our knees to the ground in repentance and our feet to the pavement in action. It was precisely these themes that worried Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. enough to pen his famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963. He addressed it to his "Fellow Clergymen," which were eight well-known white clergymen in the South, and opened by recognizing their beliefs that his "present activities 'unwise and untimely.'" Sadly, I think his letter is as needed and potent today as it was in 1963.

If Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was successful in rallying people to the cause of civil rights, I believe it was *because* the movement was birthed from the church and then moved into the secular landscape. It captured the spiritual heart of America, not just the intellect. Civil rights, therefore, was a social cause *because* it was a Christian cause—the two weren't mutually exclusive. It was believed that God championed freedom for the oppressed far more than the State did (Lk 4, Is 61), and therefore it was the church's divine mandate to see it played out.

Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets, specifically, warned the wealthy nation of Israel about the blind eye it turned toward the oppressed, the marginalized, the fatherless, the widow, and poor. Whether it was Micah citing God's call "to do justice," Isaiah's rebuke for "withholding justice from the oppressed," or Malachi's scathing call that God "will come to put you on trial" for their lack of consideration to those in need, the scriptural calls for change are prolific (Mic 6:8, Is 10:2, Mal 3:5). The book of Proverbs alone gives at least ten critical calls for God-followers to lend their attention to the oppressed (Pv 14:21, 14:31, 28:27, 31:8-9, 19:17, 22:9, 21:13, 22:22-23, 29:7, 17:5).

In the New Testament, Jesus fulfills these prophetic charges of the past by demonstrating compassion to society's oppressed. From healing the unclean (Mt 9:20, Lk 8:43), to forgiving the impure (Jn 8:11), to granting the wish of a racially outcast "Canaanite" (a derogatory term used to describe Israel's archenemy and conquered people group almost 1,500 years prior) (Mt 15: 21-28), Jesus drew rebuke from the elite and praise from the poor. His implication that Israel should show mercy to the socially outcast (the Widow of Sidon), and pray for the healing of generals over its enemy armies (Naaman the Syrian General), nearly got Jesus killed (Lk 4:25-28).

Upon Dr. King's death, many of the moral responsibilities that churches should've carried on largely disappeared, especially in white church. Since it wasn't directly impacting us, we stopped showing up to peaceful protests, stopped petitioning congressional leaders, and largely withdrew from activities in black neighborhoods. The silence became deafening. With no voice to sound the clarion call, and no central icon to look to for direction, our focus drifted from the ongoing plight of our black kinfolk, appeased by the false security of legislation. Since it was not our freedom to champion, it was not our cause to carry on. Our sickness was one of trusting laws to write on our hearts what only the hand of God can.

I believe the late Supreme Court Justice Learned Hand was well suited to critique the systems of our nation when he wondered if we “rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes.”¹ For all his influence, for all his use of law, he still concluded that the moral fiber of the nation could not be elected, but only projected. “Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it.”² Christian nationalism is the same disease that makes us believe the right President, the right Supreme Court Justices, and the right Congress will turn our country around. Neither the Constitution nor the Bill of Rights can ensure a people that will follow fast after the ways of Jesus. Only our consciences can do that. And we must find ours again.

Our head isn’t in the game because, like my high school soccer team, the white church has focused so much on our past “wins” against racism—racism that polls show the majority of white Americans think is a thing of the past³—that we’ve failed to recognize the enemy in our own house. And what a foe it is.

The past few weeks have been exhausting for me. When news first broke of Andrew Sterling’s death in Baton Rouge, followed almost immediately on my news feed by Philando Castille’s murder, I had a feeling something would be different about these incidents. Little did any of us know that what awaited us was the horrible murder of seven police officers in Dallas. And something *waw* different. I could’ve never imagined the contests I’d be embroiled in by the following Sunday.

When it comes to human rights, my church has always been in the fray, rolling up our sleeves and getting messy. From local needs and causes to international ones, from controversial guest speakers to costly projects, I’ve been so proud of the charge we’ve lead. As such, on that Sunday, I expected to fight against the world when it came to championing black lives. Instead, I faced members of white churches and members of my own church.

Much like this presidential election cycle has brought to light issues that have been festering in the hearts of voters for years, this second week of July brought to light attitudes

¹ Justice Learned Hand. “The Spirit of Liberty” - speech at “I Am an American Day” ceremony, Central Park, New York City (21 May 1944).

² Ibid.

³ Black Lives Matter and Racial Tension in America, Research Releases in Culture & Media. Captured: May 5, 2016. <https://www.barna.org/research/culture-media/research-release/black-lives-matter-and-racial-tension-in-america#.V5-F55MrK34>

which, personally, I was naive to think weren't present. Facebook truly lets people say things that are in their hearts that they would rarely say in public, at least not face-to-face with people they respect.

Every argument, every talking point, every quarrel has a common thread: *none of them are from the black perspective*. Not one. They are from whites, white homes, white churches, and white news machines. Not a single contentious white person that I've spoken with has been able to respond to me when I've questioned whether or not they've asked a black person what they think about any of this. The truth is, many whites care more about the opinions we can derive from news sources than we can from those the news is about. We care more about the opinions we come up with, those seemingly logical arguments that ensure our safety and security than we do about the opinions of blacks.

"Well I have plenty of black friends," is a common retaliation from those I've encountered. But have we spoken with them? Have we asked them to bare their soul to us? And if their responses sound oddly like our own, have we ever considered that if our public rhetoric matches that of those in white news, that they're fearful of telling us the truth? I wonder how many are standing in our churches, afraid to speak. I wonder if their desperation to find a place of worship exceeds their fear of being shunned. How noble. And how tragic.

My black friends have been pulled over for tail lights being out, only to be handcuffed and placed in the back of a police car. Multiple times. Unwarranted. That's never happened to me. As children, my black friends had squirt guns taken away by their parents for fear that someone would misappropriate it for a real gun. That's never happened to me. My black friends were regularly followed home at night by cop cars while on their college campuses. That's never happened to me. Whether you chose to recognize it or not, our society has built a culture of trust around her white citizens and a culture of suspicion around her black. It's on every street corner, every college campus, in every grocery store, and yes, even in our churches.

Most whites, probably including you, don't have original first-hand experience with growing up in inner-city neighborhoods, participating in civil rights marches, or working and playing in environments where we are perpetually suspect. Therefore, it is perhaps one of the grossest misuses of our privilege to so easily buy in to and regurgitate rhetoric that has not originated from our own life experience. We would not want it done to us, so we should not

do it to others. Of all the news to believe, wouldn't we want to hear from our neighbors first? Wouldn't we give those that the news is actually about the first right of refusal in speaking to us about what's happening on the streets?

The truth is, we'd rather believe what's fed to us online and on TV than we would do the hard work of building meaningful relationships with those who we have seemingly nothing in common.

Our head isn't in the game because, like my high school soccer team, we only like playing well on our home field. We like our team's plays, our coach's terminology, and our crowd's cheering. We only like when we win.

Speaking the Same Language

One of the things that inspires me about black culture in the United States is the emphasis placed on community. To make my point by contrast, nowhere have I ever heard whites use the pronoun *the white community* to discuss large-scale social issues. We never talk about things that are important to *white culture*, or how things are affecting *whites*. We're just *us*. But to blacks, the *black community* is an all-encompassing term that gathers anyone of color into the fold. What effects one of them effects all of them. There's such a deep sense of personal identity because of a shared struggle that, right or wrong, they all benefit or suffer from one another's behavior.

I recently heard a story from a black man who said that when another person of color starts acting up in a public place, he immediately thinks, "Oh, no. Please, stop. You're just going to make things worse for all of us [blacks] tomorrow." That's because things are felt by a community. In *no* context have I *ever* looked at another white person doing something stupid and thought, "You're going to make things so hard for me tomorrow as a white man." I simply thought, "Wow, you're foolish." And that was the end of it.

For whites, our identity is almost exclusively wrapped up in who we are as *individuals*. Our world revolves around our safety, our family, our job, our church, our state, our nation. We have a deep sense of personal ownership in nearly everything we do, even when discussing massive entities. We use terms like "my company" for the firm we work for even though we have nothing to do with corporate ownership.

While much of this attitude is honorable, and it's something I'm proud of as a white man, it's also extremely debilitating when trying to understand a culture that doesn't have this mindset.

In *the black community*, when one person suffers, they empathize; in *the white community*, when someone suffers, we sympathize. In *the black community*, when one person wins, they all feel as if they've won; in *the white community*, when one person wins, we are happy for them (if not secretly jealous).

It's for these reasons, and many more, that the black community sees injustice *done to one member* as part of a larger systemic problem *done to all members*. This mirrors how God weighs individual sufferings as corporate sufferings.⁴ Oppression has a powerful way of uniting those who suffer commonly while dominance insulates those who benefit from the comforts of narcissism. This is why there are black riots in the streets when a black man is gunned down by police, but hardly a tear shed by whites. Accordingly, if a white person doesn't perceive that they have racist tendencies in his or her own heart, then it's written off as someone else's problem. "Me? I'm all right," we say. Because we're *individualistic* in nature. You may be fine, my friend, but for a people whose worldview is about community and systems and congregations, *we* are not fine. We are complicit *because* we're a part of a larger community. "How horrible to be lumped in with others just because of the color of my skin," you might say, to which I reply, *welcome*.

To miss the significance of this is to fail to place yourself in someone else's context. What's the importance of adopting someone else's perspective? Someone else's language, culture and ideology? If you're a Christian, try asking Jesus.

If Jesus acted like many of us, he would've shown up on Earth in a celestial body. Not flesh, but something heavenly, because it looked better, smelled better, bled less, and ached less. He would've disregarded Aramaic as a language and instead insisted that everyone try learning the native tongue of heaven, then he would've written anyone off who didn't bother to pick it up quickly. He would've abstained from all customs, traditions, and cultural nuances, because He's God, after all—what good are those?—and then imposed only ideologies which were eternal.

⁴ Exodus 3:9 (ESV): "And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them."

The point of adopting the worldview of others is that we become as like them as possible to serve them without being noticed. Taking on the conditions of others is the very essence of the incarnation! Without it, we'd never know Jesus. We only know God in his fullness because He chose to know us in ours.

Adopting That Which Isn't Our Own

Another chief problem with using rhetoric that's not based on first-hand experience from the culture that's being critiqued is that it undermines any moral claim we have to unconditional love.

One of the growing discrepancies in our nation is the belief that we, white US citizens, mentally subscribe to equality as a moral fiber in the core of our country but, as individuals, we don't employ it so blindly (as blind Lady Liberty suggests on the New York State flag). This truth can be validated by rhetorically thinking through an alternate version of Philander Castille's murder.

Had social and corporate media made known that a black police officer gunned down a middle-class, white 32-year-old male in a car carrying the driver's girlfriend and 9-year-old daughter, the white outcry would've been deafening. Then imagine if the investigation went to a grand jury that handed down a "no indictment" ruling—over and over and over again.

But what has been our collective response, white Christians?

Not remorse. Not grief. Not outrage that prompts letter writing. Not the sending of condolences.

Instead, we're bickering.

Surely the prophet knew of the times in which we live when he wrote, "What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling?" (Is 58:4). Blood runs in the streets, and my armchair Christians are found bickering. Defensive. Even hostile.

Yet grief over the murders of Dallas and Baton Rouge police officers has prompted a national outpouring of white sympathy and condolence-sending. The odd part is, I'm not arguing with that. It *should* prompt a national outcry of disgust and sympathy.

And so should the other. Christians should *always* grieve when life is lost. We are to be pro-life across the board. Regardless of investigations and findings, when someone dies, when

a family loses a loved one, when a community mourns, Christians must be found in the middle of it, weeping “with those who weep” (Rom 12:15).

We betray our morals when our grief is mono-centric. The silence is deafening, and Dr. King’s letter haunts us from the grave. King added, “A minister cannot preach the glories of heaven while ignoring social conditions in his own community that cause men an earthly hell.”⁵

As seen by our endless diatribes on issues that miss the point via social media, we're far from equal when it comes to our behavioral esteem of our black brothers' and sisters' lives. We should be livid at the slayings of police officers just as we should be livid at the slayings of black civilians. Death is a human cause that should always provoke an equal outcry. Equality isn't a proclamation; it's a heart reflection. And if there's no light to reflect than belief in true equality isn't there.

During his Nobel Peace Prize speech in 1986, the late theologian, Holocaust survivor and human rights activist Elie Wiesel said, "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

The atrocity is not that men were murdered in the last two weeks; it's that men were murdered and we did not show equal grief as those who claim to champion equality so ferociously. As Wiesel was famous for saying, “Indifference, to me, is the epitome of evil.”¹

“Christopher, do you expect me to mourn for people that I have no connection to?”

No, I don't expect you to mourn equally for people you can't relate to.

But God does.

The call to “mourn with those who mourn” is a sacred responsibility to take on the suffering of another as if it was your own, *especially* because they are not like you (Rom 12:15). This is the epitome of what it was for Jesus to be a man of sorrows acquainted with grief (Is 53:3). Imagine if God had not decided to take on sorrow that was not his own. Taking on others' pains as our own *is* the gospel. Our failure to grieve with others is not only the violation of a sacred Christian discipline, but it always results in the idolization of chronic self-interest.

⁵ Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Captured 08/07/2016.
<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/chapter-18-letter-birmingham-jail>

Our spiritual condition can no longer afford to be casually numb toward the hurting lives of others. I challenge you to read 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 and let it confront you, to sift you. Then flip to Romans 12:9-21, and ask how you measure up. We must sit and *truly* process these texts, allowing the Holy Spirit the opportunity to convict us as He will, especially when we ask him this question: "Am I harboring hatred, disdain, or ill-will toward anyone?" (Jn 16:8) And another: "Is my habit of listening to the media's conclusions precluding me from hearing from hurting lives?"

If the answer to either or both of these questions is *yes*, and we're not willing to take on our own hatred, we must consider which Jesus and which gospel we're claiming allegiance to. National inequality will not change until personal indifference is confronted.

When do we have *real* equality? When have we beaten this national issue of racism? When "how you treat them is how you treat me" becomes the law of the land, felt in every system and every soul; when those who have the power to condemn all unjust acts do so; when the strong perfectly protect and provide for the weak regardless of what the weak say, do, or believe; when we deliver individuals perpetually stuck in systems of poverty; when jails are no longer a result of profiling; when educational districts do not rise and fall on the mean income of their constituents, but reflect the Christian heart for the health, safety and education of *all* our children; when we disempower any system or way of thinking that restricts or inhibits the freedom of all people, then, my friends, we have true equality (Is 58).

The Language of Movements

It seems overly simplistic to say that language is important. But in fewer contexts is such a statement more important than in race relations. Better said, language is everything. The language we use not only shapes our worldview, but it always points backward to the source that we got our language from. If someone says "youse" as a plural form of "you" when addressing a small group of people, I know they're from western New York State, in or around the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls. If someone says they want a Vernors "pop" to drink, I know they are from the Midwest, between Ohio and Michigan. Our verbiage is a road map that speaks about our past, and our perception.

I can point to the people in my church who only watch and listen to conservative commercial media. Not only are the line-item talking points verbatim to what's presented in newscasts, but so is the *spirit*.

I admire Jesus for being so culturally aware of first-century near-eastern happenings that he didn't reserve his critiques to only spiritual things. Instead, he took on the hot topics of his day with, often times, brutal analysis. Not only did Jesus warn his disciples about a religious spirit, which tends to get people to act like God is in control when really they are, but he warned them about a political spirit as well (Mk 8:15, Mat 16:6). This, mind you, is not the *out* that many would like to have, claiming Christians shouldn't be involved in politics. Far from. It is instead a critique against the spirit that always seeks to distance itself from impurity, turning its back on others—especially of our own kind—the moment things get messy. Watching the GOP writhe on top of itself in this current election cycle is exhibit A.

Commercial news is first entertainment before it is informative. To miss this fact is to ignore decades of findings as to the motives and tactics of media agencies. To quote Justice Hand again, "The hand that rules the press, the radio, the screen and the far-spread magazine, rules the country."⁶ Worse still, commercial news' chief marketing ploy is dissension. It gains traction by stirring up arguments and keeps its viewership by extending debate well beyond healthy boundaries. One of our board members at New Life recently confessed that he didn't realize how bent he was on contentiously bickering with all his friends until after he stopped watching and listening to conservative news.

The political spirit of the news is doing *nothing* to foster the spirit of Jesus in us. There is nothing in it that fuels, invests, inspires, encourages and admonishes us to press into the compassion of God. Worse still, dependence on media to craft our lines of thinking voids us of the creativity needed to actually shape culture after heaven. Even if the pursuit is informational, you and I can consume all the news of the day in less than four minutes. *Four minutes*. The rest is geared to entertaining us and keeping us tuned in. If we're only eating from the talking points of commercial media, where is our appetite for the values of the kingdom? If Jesus said the world would know that we're his disciples because of our love for one another, is it any wonder the world is left wondering (Jn 13:35)? If anything, I believe

⁶ Justice Learned Hand - "Proceedings in Memory of Justice Brandeis" (1942).

"the news" is doing the very thing we never saw coming: tickling our ears (2 Tim 4:3). It seems to me that scripture was warning us about ourselves.

Being aware of the polarizing tongue of media and then leaning into the language of the marginalized is one of the first steps we can take toward correcting a misaligned worldview. But this requires critical thinking, and it can be painfully tedious at first.

The language of any movement is always particular. Black Lives Matter (BLM), while it has its own issues and shortcomings, cannot be so casually ignored as many attempt to do. Just as soon as the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter started to trend on social media two years ago, the #AllLivesMatter hashtag wasn't far behind. Championed by whom? Conservative whites. For a political group that prided itself on not being politically correct, we suddenly became very inclusive.

Our sudden need to include the whole world in every comment is making it a sin to be specific. As soon as the news reached me of the attack in Nice, France, I posted a call to "Pray for France" on my Instagram account. Within moments, someone commented, "We need to pray for all nations."

No. At that very moment, we needed to pray for France.

As a pastor, imagine if someone asked me to pray for their family, and I replied, "I'd like to, but it's more important that we pray for all families."

"But Christopher, all lives matter."

No one has said that all lives don't matter. But ask yourself, *do they?* If they really did, I wonder if we'd have less hurting people.

The tragic part is that in our preemptive leap to say #AllLivesMatter, we've made an embarrassing but revealing blunder because we don't draw the same conclusion for any other issue.

Imagine if firefighters responded to a house fire but were thwarted by neighbors shouting, "All houses matter! Come make sure my house isn't on fire!"

No reasonable person protests Breast Cancer Awareness Month when no one is handing out ribbons for Prostate Cancer Awareness; no reasonable person gets upset the United Way's donation box isn't beside the Salvation Army's red kettle in December; no reasonable person sees Girl Scouts selling cookies and gets upset that the Boy Scouts aren't

selling cookies too. If any of these scenarios bother me, it proves I am petty, insensitive, and intellectually dysfunctional.

Movements are about focus, not exclusion. The Pro-Life movement focuses on the unborn, Hospice focuses on the dying, the Ugandan Water Project focuses on the water shortage in Uganda. All needs do matter, but certain needs matter more for specific times in specific cultures. And right now, black lives are in need in our culture. In fact, they've been in need for a *very long time*. No one's excluding other needs; if they are, they're wrong to do so. I was just in Mexico championing Mexican lives, and in Switzerland championing Swiss lives. But here at home, it's a gross misappropriation of limited resources to put out a campfire instead of a house fire even though both are fires.

BLM is a matter of focus, not exclusion. Saying something matters does not negate everything else that also matters, it's merely bringing it to the forefront, especially when it's been violently brushed aside. BLM has risen from a context in which blacks categorically do not receive the same treatment that whites do; to then reprimand them for bringing this to light is one of the most unChristian behaviors imaginable.

But here's the worst part: blacks shouldn't have to raise awareness of atrocities against them. Christians should. Ending black suffering is not a black cause; it's a Christian cause. This means that the church must champion *every form of justice*, not just those white church enjoys.

Blacks shouldn't have to raise awareness about their mistreatment. Whites should. Death and mistreatment are human causes, and should always provoke an equal outcry *from Christians*. It is unbecoming for any majority to not use their inherent power to champion the cause of the mistreated; such was the judgment of God against Israel (Is 58). If we're going to tout American values, what could be more American? If we're going to wave our Christian flags, what could be more Christian?

“They're not doing it our way.”

What that statement really says is, “It's not Christian enough for us.” May I ask what movements have been Christian enough for us as a national church? The cause of blacks in the pre-Civil War south? The cause of First Nations People on the Trail of Tears? The cause of women during the suffrage era? If the church is waiting for things to be “Christian enough”

for us to rally behind, then we will unite for nothing, and that — my white Christian readers — is where we are today. Worse still, if we're not leaders of movements to stop the oppression of others, we become leaders-by-default of movements who endorse mistreatment; many a God-fearing-Christian donned a KKK cap, cleared Cherokee land, and told their wives to keep quiet.

The bottom line for many whites is that the BLM movement is not Christian enough for them. It's not conservative enough, it's not tame enough, it's not predictable enough. Yet, here we are again, presupposing how marginalized people are feeling and therefore how they should behave in public. The fact that only 37% of whites agree with the Black Lives Matter movement proves that we really don't care about the voice of blacks: if we did, I would hope that their 70% approval rating of BLM would change our minds.⁷ Shouldn't their cause be our cause by virtue of their humanity?

This is by no means to say that BLM has every corner on virtue; of course not! Like every organization, they're not perfect. But perfection is never the qualification that summons us to a cause; had it been, Jesus never would have hastened so adamantly to earth. It is both illogical and the epitome of Christian nearsightedness to insist that worldly organizations intrinsically adhere to Christian ethics. Instead, it is the presence of light in darkness that chases shadows to the corners. The world is not dark because it's full of unbelievers, the world is dark because it's not more full of Christians.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," Dr. King wrote.⁸ Violence is never good, and it must always be condemned. Hate speech against people or police is never good, and it must always be condemned. But rather than invest, add our voices, and participate in the messy hard work of making a movement better, our critics stand safely on the sidelines and cast judgment without so much as a phone call made, a rally attended, or a dime spent. We just watch the news.

"Stop making this a black and white issue. It just divides people."

It absolutely divides people. Unquestionably.

⁷ CBS News/New York Times Poll. July 8-12, 2016. Captured 07/21/2016. <http://www.pollingreport.com/race.htm>

⁸ Letter from Birmingham Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Captured 07/21/2016. https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf

But so do Christian altar calls where some people respond to the gospel and others don't. So do Pro-Life anti-abortion rallies where people deeply and passionately disagree on whether it's a fetus or a baby.

If what you mean to say is that talking about the delineation between colors brings light to the suffering of an entire people group and that somehow makes you uncomfortable, then be honest enough to use those exact terms. When there is disagreement on a point, speaking clearly about that point doesn't bring division; division was already inherent. But *not* speaking only ignores the problem. The church must cease rallying around false unity. We must stop placating our incessant need to agree on everything at the expense of obtuse dialogue about specific issues. I would rather name a cause and be divided than pretend that we are all one with destructive hidden biases. The point of revealing polarized positions is to bring about restoration; anything less makes us complicit in the coverup.

If it's not a black and white issue, then why are the problems with the movement being raised by whites? And in so doing, so defensively? It's precisely a black and white issue *because* we've refused to bring healing, to come alongside them and champion their justice as our own. We've refused to ask them how *they* feel about the issues that pertain to them. And don't let one black person or one experience be your case study; you'd never want that done to you, so don't stand by such results for others.

It was God who created color, God himself thought it was beautiful and valuable. He created melanin, ethnicity, and culture. It was God who designed our faculties to reflect attributes of his divine nature. It is only when we label those colors that we become complicit in unraveling the tapestry of God's design. Race is a perversion of our own making to establish hierarchy and classes among peoples. This *is* a white and black thing because we've not been faithful to esteem the Jesus in entire segments of humanity. If division is indeed the product, then the desire for renewed unity should be the result, starting with our repentance.

“This isn't a race issue, it's a sin issue.”

Christians saying this isn't about race, only sin, makes it about race *and* sin.

If we only confront world hunger by diagnosing it as a sin issue, further prescribing the gospel as medication, and yet do nothing to correct the wrong of hunger, scripture says what kind of Christians we are (and it's not good) (Lk 11:11, Mat 7:9, 25, Jam 1:27, 2:17, Ps

40:6). Sin is absolutely the root cause of all our issues, but if using it as the flagship anecdote undermines our common responsibility to meet the needs of hurting people, then it's irresponsible. Mankind's sin causes world poverty, but it's an economic disparity issue; mankind's sin causes AIDS, as it does every other disease that afflicts humanity, but it's a biological issue; mankind's sin causes obesity, but it's a diet issue; mankind's sin causes diabetes, but it's a sugar issue.

Such a mindset tends to come from those who believe that their only responsibility is to "preach the Gospel" and not to get involved with meeting the physical needs of their neighbors. I recently watched a video of a national Christian leader who esteemed this exact view (which has since been removed from the internet).⁹ While I've read many of the speaker's books, such a stance is deplorable. It's a cop-out answer because it doesn't require involvement.

Yes, sin is an issue that begets other issues. But to ignore the specific needs caused by racial inequality and hope that the gospel will bring healing to them is negligent. All lives will matter when black lives matter. And right now, black lives don't matter enough to move us beyond the white talking points of white media outlets. Until then, we're rallying around false unity, especially within the church.

"#BLM is violent, communist, Marxist, funded by George Soros, and calls for police deaths to overthrow the government and create anarchy, and if blacks want us to think better of them then they better address black-on-black violence first."

I'm getting weary of the blistering ignorance, and I'm but a white male in my thirties. I truly can't imagine how blacks feel. The fact that they've maintained their composure for so long under such idiotic indictments is a testament to the moral integrity they have as a culture.

I'm getting weary of people not thinking for themselves. But if you need me to think for you, I will suffer it a little longer.

Firstly, if people touting these talking points spent half as much time investing in the BLM cause as they do listening to talk radio hosts on their daily commutes, we might see some real change. They're addicted to the media. My advice? *Detox.*

⁹ □ "Racism and Black Lives Matter - John MacArthur," The Master's Seminary. Captured 07/06/2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHCwelfYjIg&feature=youtu.be> □ NOTE: Removed as of 07/27/2016.

As for the unwarranted assumption that the entire movement is violent because of fringe participants who act violently, is this the same logic used for all Christians simply because Westboro Baptist says they love Jesus? Do we assume all Pro-Life rallies are violent because protestors scream at mother's that they're going to hell? For murdering doctors? For bombing clinics?

Further, does your conservative news agency of choice report on peaceful BLM marches? How often? *Then surely that must mean they don't exist.* Or it means that the entertainment companies that own the news agencies have agendas, and they know exactly how to serve us in ways that keep us coming back for more.

Combine the erroneous conclusions that there are no peaceful BLM expressions with the utter lack (if not absence) of black relationships speaking to the contrary in our lives, and you have a runaway assumption that actually *looks* for the next headline.

To date, I've researched and found less than six political groups that have called for "dead cops" in marches; none of them were BLM. I've also found videos of only three riots of supposed BLM endorsement to violent crime, two of which were attributed to violent organizations who were exploiting the opportunity of BLM protests, and the last of which was a group of neighbors in the immediate wake of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri.

The single most common video whites trumpet as the evidence that BLM is complicit in violent activity is one taped in New York City in 2014 during the Million March NYC protest. Interestingly, the protestors in that scene are actually part of a violent fringe group called the Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee (TMOC), which was vehemently denounced by the host organization. TMOC is also responsible for creating the #TurnUpTheAnger, #KillCops, and #ShootThePolice hashtags (among others), and inspired additional hate groups like Generation Zero and New York City Zero. None of them have any affiliation with BLM and have been publicly denounced. (BuzzFeed News posted a complete story on the "dead cops chant" and how these stories were built over time).¹⁰

To think that news agencies don't have an agenda, and aren't doing everything in their power to insight bias by omitting the entire story is naive. As for BLM itself, to think that

¹⁰ "The Origins Of The Alleged "Dead Cops" Chant", BuzzFeed News. Originally posted on Dec. 31, 2014, at 8:18 am: https://www.buzzfeed.com/tasneemnashrulla/protesters-against-police-brutality-arent-advocating-for-dea?utm_term=.xd2L2VwbVd#.yWA3jrkgX

impassioned, marginalized people are not going to be full of emotion is near-sighted, and it doesn't give us permission to write off the deeper pains that they're crying out from. Mature insightful people recognize this and have tremendous long-suffering for it. Further still, Christians will have far more in common with the goals of BLM than not, if we'd only take the time to meet blacks involved with the movement.

Nowhere has BLM ever sanctioned, endorsed or promoted violence as a means to raise awareness about the importance of black lives. Nowhere. Stop regurgitating the rhetoric. It's false and inaccurate. If you haven't read their charter, do so.¹¹ And if you haven't read "The 11 Major Misconceptions About The Black Lives Matter Movement," you should.¹² Every time violence has resulted, they've been the first to condemn it.

Passing judgment on any movement based on the wayward conduct of fringe participants is an intensely faulted activity; such violence betrays the core values of the movement itself, so why leap to the conclusion that violators are representative?

Further, we hate when it's done to us. Would we, Christians whose religion's actions are far from lily-white, not plead with critics to disregard violence and instead endorse the core message of our movement? Certainly, we owe the black community the very same grace which we ask of the rest of the world when trying to defend our causes.

And even if the accusations were correct—that the behavior of a small portion of a minority jeopardized the perception of that minority in the eyes of a majority—since when did this ever give us the right as Christians to not lay our lives down in pursuit of justice for hurting people? I'm astounded that such logic exists at all, much less that it prevents otherwise good people from engaging in battles worth fighting. Don't entertain this logic, refute it at every turn at any cost. It's demonic in origin, and we're called to have nothing to do with such fruitless endeavors (Eph 5:11).

Lastly, the argument has been raised that BLM is secretly funded by manipulative elites with mischievous agendas. Even if this were to be true with paper trails clearly verifying such suspicions, does it change the fact that Christians should be championing the marginalized? There are no pure, no perfect organizations. I find it preposterous that when it comes to critiquing the conservative right there are not the same accusations; do we not also

¹¹ "Who We Are" (page), Black Lives Matter. Captured 07/19/2016: <http://blacklivesmatter.com/who-we-are/>

¹² "The 11 Major Misconceptions About The Black Lives Matter Movement," Black Lives Matter. Captured 07/19/2016: <http://blacklivesmatter.com/11-major-misconceptions-about-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>

have manipulative elites funding mischievous agendas? To think otherwise betrays commonsense. If there is any question that “dark money” cannot be repurposed for good causes, I hold the entire church world in contempt.

Stop Debating, Start Standing

The truth is that the church is late to the modern civil rights game, so we don’t get to set the ground rules. A movement is already underway, and that means we don’t get to bring a critique until we’ve earned the right to speak. And right now, many in our midst are undermining any future chance we have at ever being vocal.

Do I wish protests were handled differently? Yes, but until I’m willing to invest in a rally, the soap box belongs to someone else. Do I like all the verbiage and terminology being used? No. But until I show faithfulness in serving, for taking on someone else’s pain as if it were my own, there’s little reason for people to honor my suggestions.

While we’re late to the movement we don’t have to be late to good leadership.

In the lead up to World War II, theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer was outspoken in his assessment that the German State Church was complicit in the rise of Hitler’s Nazi regime. It was the church’s failure to protest the signs of evil, as well as their error in esteeming German nationalism in the guise of Christian ethics above their call to be Christ followers, that aided the 3rd Reich’s rise.

Bonhoeffer and others were able to be voices to the contrary in the midst of violent opposition. Working within the “Confessing Church,” which operated underground in direct contrast to the Nazi-controlled State Church, German Christians championed freedom of thought, art, theology, and social justice in the shadow of horrific oppression.

While it’s believed that an oft-quoted paragraph from Albert Einstein praising the church is too embellished to be his own words, there is factual evidence that Einstein did say that he found “hardly any German intellectuals except a few churchmen were supporting individual rights and intellectual freedom.”¹³ It’s believed that he was speaking in direct reference to the Confessing Church.

As Christians, our moral allegiance to Jesus never affords us the luxury of observation without participation. But why would we settle for such a diminutive posture? For secular

¹³ “Did Einstein Praise the Church? A statement attributed to Einstein isn’t what it claims to be,” William C. Waterhouse, 2005. Captured 07/09/2016: <http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/06-01-05/>

humanity to value its own safety and security above its responsibility to others is one thing, but it is unbecoming of the Christian. If we are aware of oppression, manipulation, and injustice, divine ethics mandates that we act, *regardless* of what's attached.

"The opposite of love is not hate," Wiesel said, "it's indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference between life and death."¹⁴

Today is the time for the church to shed the spirit of indifference like grave clothes and take our place in speaking prophetically over every community that is distraught, disenfranchised, and divided.

Today is the time for the church to accept responsibility for our part in being silent when we should've spoken up. It's not too late. As long as we convene together in the name of Christ and burn for hurting people enough to shake us from our apathy, it's not too late.

We must allow the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts individually, taking stock of any hatred we harbor toward anyone else. These sentiments must be reconciled to Christ. This process can often be painful and shocking as we unearth things within us that we never knew were there, but it must be done.

I've walked Christian soldiers through their violent hatred for Afghans; women through the hatred of their violent ex-husbands; wealthy business executives through their hatred of their employees; and, most appropriately for this conversation, whites and blacks through their hatred of one another. The scariest part is that it doesn't even have to be hatred—sometimes it's as simple as suspicion.

When I pass three white men on the sidewalk in my city, smoking cigarettes and talking on cell phones, I barely register their presence; but when it's three black men smoking cigarettes and talking on cell phones, they become suspects. I would be lying if I said I don't fight that still. But I gain victory with every new day that I ask for my mind to be renewed (Rom 12:1-2).

The civil rights movement the 1950s had the chance to awaken a nation to atrocities violated against African Americans, but today we have an unprecedented opportunity to kill racism in our country once and for all. In one generation, we could call it for what it is and wipe it out. My children are already more culturally savvy than I was at their age, and they've

¹⁴ Interview with Elie Wiesel and U.S. media, 1986

learned to spot racist commentary as near as our neighbors and as far away as TV personalities. They do not have to inherit the same country we're inheriting, and they're poised to be more loving and accepting than any generation previous. Lord, may it be.

I have already met hostility from my own tribe, from whites, for my support of black causes; I expect this letter to generate more. But if it's taken me this long to endure the fallout of racial bias from my own kind, it's about time. Only in recent months have I been made aware that my black friends endured physical beatings when it was discovered they had white friends. I write this now, weeping at my desk. How has it been so long a chapter that I have not been vocal enough to merit the same? May I never be so silent, may I never be so unaware.

Instead of the quarrels that we see on social media, can we not, the church, post the positive happenings that we see in the civil rights movement? Can we not commit ourselves to refrain from writing about all the negative aspects, and instead champion the greatness we perceive, if even fledgling and immature? We must find our prophetic voice! The world is waiting for us!

Sadly, much of what the world has heard is not echo of a divine Father who speaks life over his children, but a bastard parent who only spouts scorn and ridicule. Not so with us, sister and brothers. We are those who have been called to celebrate anytime we see people pursuing causes that right wrongs. We are not dissuaded by the humanness of a movement's cause, but we rally around it and then lean forward to a point on the horizon where a more perfect way is seen.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." (Luke 4:18)

Not the leaven of Herod or the leaven of the Pharisees. But the divine spirit of God is on us "for such a time as this" to act as his ambassadors. Our allegiance is to another kingdom, long before we swear oaths to a worldly nation.

"For he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor." (Luke 4:18)

And *bring* we must, which means it arrives as we arrive. Facebook comments are not an agent of *bringing*. But our physical being, moving into situations and circumstances which desperately need our presence is what the world needs.

"He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free." (Luke 4:18)

When filled with the Spirit of God, such edicts are not lip service but divine mandates. If they don't happen now, they will happen soon, and these are the swords that we will fall upon in trying. The world is awaiting the lion's voice in the lamb's body, and we must not make them wait. For if we tarry much longer, they will be forced to take up swords of their own, I shudder to think what will be done with such passion if not governed by the Holy Spirit.

“And that the time of the Lord's favor has come.” (Luke 4:19)

You and I don't have to question heaven on these fronts. When we take up such calls to action, we're not only aligning our behavior in accordance with heaven, but we have the King's approval! The signet ring is on our fingers to sanction declarations on behalf of the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the poor, and sick. If favor is a measure of power and access, then I must ask myself what I'm doing with the power that God's already given me and my current measure of access to his presence. May he only find us to be faithful stewards with both, which opens even greater doors for more of his favor.

The church, rather than squabble about whether an earthly movement is or isn't Christian enough to back, should be rallying behind every possible form of liberty we can find. We should be the loudest voices, the biggest donors, the most emphatic participants, the most prolific writers, and the most memorable theme makers. If there are no laws against the Fruits of the Spirit, then we should be excessive in our demonstration of them, so much so that the world wonders as our origin since we are behaving so otherworldly (Gal 5:22-23, Ac 17:6).

The Church In Action

We've discussed perspective, and we've explored language; now it's time for calls to action. As previously stated, the following is by no means an exhaustive or definitive list. It is, rather, my attempt to inspire others to works of greatness (Jn 14:12). The adage that talk is cheap bears out in the arena of life. As such, nothing I'm offering are steps I'm not already actively engaged in. None of the following is theoretical, it is all actual.

It's also worth noting that one of the worst times to educate people is when there's blood in the streets. This is precisely why the US Armed Forces don't train on the battlefield, but in places and times of peace, and why they coined the phrase “sweat more, bleed less.” So

much of what we've seen in the last two weeks is leaders doing their best to educate while the wounds are still fresh. Instead, we need to create plans for ongoing education in our respective cultures. Not only will we minimize unreasonable reactions, but we will help lead the charge in proactively killing racism once and for all.

- **Befriend someone who doesn't look like you.** No one ever claims they know what swimming is like by remaining on the shore. If in 2016 you still believe that blacks aren't a marginalized people group and that whites aren't complicit in it, my best means to convince you is to ask that you habitually take the time to immerse yourself in black culture. Specifically, make a new friend who's black. Spend time in his or her neighborhood, look for ways to see the world through his or her eyes and refuse to justify why he or she should see the world through yours. Get off the beach and swim. It's the best way I've learned, and I believe the same is true for you.

- **Read, research, and recycle.** This may sound odd, but don't ask a black person to educate you. While you may see this as a humble approach—placing yourself in the pupil's desk and them at the teacher's chalkboard—they see this as one more instance of the master making the slave tell them what they need to know to be better. You have access to the same internet, the same books, the same speakers, and the same stories. Do the hard work of educating yourself, and resist the urge to make black people your tutors when they should just be your friends. Once you've invested in materials that have challenged and shaped the way you think, pass them on to others so they can benefit from what you know. I've attached the beginnings of a syllabus at the end of this letter. I can not stress enough the importance of reading perspectives different than your own. While *everyone's* knee-jerk reaction to this challenge is intellectual self-preservation, our own discomfort is something we must all be willing to risk in order to pursue the higher goal of understanding and loving others more than we currently do. We can not achieve this without the hard work of looking through the lenses of those we don't agree with.

- **Fast from the negative, report the positive.** This is not a blind exercise in altruism, but a new discipline that needs to shape your Christian worldview to be more like Christ's. Look back over your last week of comments on social media, or mentally review your dialogue with friends; recognize just how much of it is negative, and then make a conscious decision to catch yourself in the future. Pause your typing and consider the good that's being done

instead, then write about it. (Yes, you may need to research to find it). Catch yourself in mid-sentence and choose to talk about something life-giving. Just like detoxing from news, this process can be tedious at first, but it will eventually allow your head to get in alignment with God's heart and think creatively.

- **Ask your church where they stand on civil rights.** I wince at belligerent church members just as much as the next pastor, so please be sensitive. But adding your voice to others who are speaking up may help inspire your church to take action. Ask if your board is drafting or has drafted axioms about where your church stands on causes locally and abroad. See what platforms for ongoing education and intervention are in play, and ask how you can perpetuate them. And always ask yourself: if everyone in my church acted like me, what would the church look like? In all, your promptings may be the catalyst for a much-needed corporate examination.

- **Start, join, develop, attend, and contribute to peaceful public gatherings.** Whether in homes, churches or in the town square, there is no substitute for first-hand knowledge. If we're going to take to heart the Biblical mandate to be quick to listen and slow to speak, we'd better make sure we're doing a whole lot more participating and a whole lot less critiquing (Jm 1:9). Better still, ask your new black friend what civil rights gathering they're attending next, and see if you can join. Attend anything that peacefully supports the cause of the marginalized. And if there are no movements in your city or town, look to help those who are starting something. As I type this, our church is in the planning phases of organizing a multi-church, community-leaders-driven event called Love Louder (#LoveLouderWatertown).¹⁵ It's shining a proactive light on #BlackLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter. I'm excited to be a part of such forward-thinking people and hope our obedience becomes another city's permission.

- **Give to funds that are helping black lives matter more.** I've always found that giving money toward a cause not only makes me feel a part of the solution, but it always has a tendency to shut down the voice of my inner critic. As humans, we don't beat prejudice by keeping it in but by celebrating its antithesis. If you're jealous of someone's looks, the fastest way to set yourself free is to give them a genuine compliment. And if you're stewing internally toward blacks, even after this long letter, one of the fastest ways to kill your animosity is to

¹⁵ Love Louder Watertown. Captured 08/01/2016. <http://newlifenny.com/lovelouder/> Scheduled for 08/18/2016.

part with your cash to serve them. Money represents time, and time represents life. When you give your money, you're giving some of your life. A list of recommended organizations can be found in this footnote.¹⁶

I want to close with a 2001 quote from revered South African Bishop Peter Storey, PhD, whose sustained opposition to the apartheid government was and remains a beacon to guide us all.

American preachers have a task more difficult, perhaps, than those faced by us under South Africa's apartheid, or Christians under Communism. We had obvious evils to engage; you have to unwrap your culture from years of red, white and blue myth. You have to expose, and confront, the great disconnect between the kindness, compassion and caring of most American people, and the ruthless way American power is experienced, directly and indirectly, by the poor of the earth. You have to help good people see how they have let their institutions do their sinning for them. This is not easy among people who really believe that their country does nothing but good, but it is necessary, not only for their future, but for us all.¹⁷

May we do the hard work annihilating racism in our day so that future generations may be free to spend their energies on even more noble pursuits.

Sincerely,

Pastor Christopher Hopper

¹⁶ http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/black_led_racial_justice_organizations

¹⁷ "Dear Friends of the United States" (letter), September 2001. Peter Storey (<https://divinity.duke.edu/faculty/peter-storey>). Captured: 08/07/2016. <https://goo.gl/ox7mwG>

Special Thanks

I want to thank the following people for their many stories, late night conversations, meaningful dialogues, and input, editing, fact-checking and proofing of this composition. But most of all, I'm grateful for their sacrificial friendship and bold leadership in my life: Denis Johnson Jr., Ron Sykes II, Michael Peace, Kirk Gilchrist, Bernard Riley, Rebekah Berthet, Joseph Gilchrist, Costa Deir, Jason Rodgers, Val Sykes, and Torrance Jones; and to my wife, confidant, and sounding board, Jennifer.

Syllabus

Quick Reads:

Article: Dear Christians, Stop Judging the #BlackLivesMatter Movement and Start Defending the Oppressed

By Stephen Mattson 07-13-2016

<https://sojo.net/articles/dear-christians-stop-judging-blacklivesmatter-movement-and-start-defending-oppressed>

Article: I Will Bear Witness Though Heavy Laden

By Rev. Dr. Yolanda Pierce 07-12-2016

https://sojo.net/articles/i-will-bear-witness-though-heavy-laden#st_refDomain=t.co&st_refQuery=/SnSSWS94Ml

Letter from Birmingham Jail

https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf

Resources:

<https://whitealliesintraining.com/>

<http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/race-and-ethnicity>

Books:

Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart

By Christena Cleveland

Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities Into Unity, Wholeness and Justice

By Brenda Salter McNeil

Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism
By Drew G. I. Hart, foreward by Christena Cleveland

The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right
By Lisa Sharon Harper, foreward by Walter Brueggemann

America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America
By Jim Wallis

The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity
By Soong-Chan Rah

Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity
By Brenda J. Allen

Debating Race: with Michael Eric Dyson
By Michael Eric Dyson

Race Matters
By Cornel West