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"BLACK LIVES MATTER"

~ some reflections

A line of military vehicles is currently parked right outside my front window, and I can hear the sound of helicopters circling the city for the seventh night in a row. My house is just a few blocks away from the Brooklyn Center Police Department which has captured national headlines throughout the past week. Last Monday, Daunte Wright was shot and killed during a traffic stop, and his death has reignited the protests that began almost one year ago following the death of George Floyd. Once again, my city resounds with the message, "Black Lives Matter."

So, what gives a white, middle-class, conservative, evangelical Christian man the right to offer any reflections regarding the "Black Lives Matter" movement? While my skin color undoubtedly puts me at a disadvantage in this conversation, I have two reasons for opening my mouth:

First, I am surrounded by "black lives." I have three adopted sons with African blood running through their veins; I serve as a pastor of a predominately African church; my children go to an inner-city school where the skin color is predominately black; my daily commute takes me right by the courthouse where Derek Chauvin is currently on trial for the death of George Floyd (and the streets are thick with the BLM message); and I live in Brooklyn Center. In other words, I see "black lives" everywhere I look.

Secondly, my heart is burdened with how intensely divisive this issue has become over the past year. In the process of exploiting our pain for its political agendas, much of mainstream media has turned the "Black Lives Matter" message into a fault line where people feel forced to take sides. Either we embrace the "Black Lives Matter" slogan (and label everybody else as a racist), or we embrace the counter-slogan, "All Lives Matter" (and label everybody else with equally demeaning adjectives).

I want to suggest a better way. In short: (1) be careful what you criticize, and (2) be careful what you embrace.

### 1. BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU CRITICIZE

I know a number of Christians who have reacted against the "Black Lives Matter" message by emphasizing that "All Lives Matter," and I am thankful for some wise, black brothers (such as Thabiti Anyabwile) who helped me to see the false dichotomy between these two slogans. Of course, "all lives" matter. Our black brothers and sisters would probably be the first in line when it comes to celebrating this truth. We are all made in the image of God (James 3:9). We all belong to the same human race (Acts 17:26). We are all infinitely precious in God's eyes (John 3:16). We are all sinners in need of a Savior (Rom. 3:23), and we all have equal access to God through the blood of Jesus (Eph. 2:18). There are absolutely no ethnic or racial distinctions when it comes to our intrinsic worth (Gal. 3:26-28). Yes, all lives matter.

So, we can go ahead and drop the “All Lives Matter” mantra because it actually has nothing to do with the cultural conversation. We know that all lives matter. That’s not the point.

The point is that, while this message is gloriously true, the devastating reality is that our black brothers and sisters have not always been treated as if their lives really do matter.

As this country was being built on the backs of African slaves, it didn’t appear to them like “all lives matter.” Even after slavery was abolished, the race-based segregation continued to breed the antibiblical message that black lives aren’t as important as white lives. Regardless of the progress being made in many parts of the country (thanks to the tireless efforts of men like Martin Luther King Jr.), the reality is that there is still much work to be done when it comes to racial equality and ethnic harmony. I am tempted to insert a handful of statistics (such as unemployment, homelessness, housing, prison occupancy, unarmed killings, etc.), but that would probably only distract from the point I’m trying to make.

The point is that there are still many within the black community who feel devalued and overlooked in the American dream; that’s the message of “Black Lives Matter.” As one black author put it, “‘Black Lives Matter’ does not mean that only black lives matter; it means that black lives matter too” (Jemar Tisby, “The Color of Compromise,” 179).

Despite the horrific testimony of American history, black lives matter. They aren’t lesser. They aren’t second class. They aren’t periphery. They matter. Black lives really do matter.

And as Christians, we ought to be on the frontlines when it comes to emphasizing and celebrating this truth. If we know the biblical storyline (Gen. 12:1–3; Rev. 7:9) if we love the gospel (John 12:32; Eph. 2:14), and if we yearn for eternity (Rev. 5:9), then it should be our joy to link arms with our black brothers and sisters in affirming that black lives really do matter. So be careful what you criticize.

## 2. BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU EMBRACE

Part of what makes this conversation so complicated is the need to distinguish between the message and the organization. They aren’t synonymous. While the message is gloriously biblical, the organization itself is openly antibiblical. A quick online study (including the “about” section on the BLM website) reveals an organization that is blatantly hostile toward numerous biblical values such as human sexuality and biblical marriage (to say nothing of the organization’s recent financial scandal and their close association with Planned Parenthood).

I know that professing Christians hold different opinions regarding various biblical ethics. My point is simply to emphasize the importance of knowing what an organization stands for before embracing the logo. In this case, it is extremely difficult to promote the message, “black lives matter,” without also promoting the organization. In other words, if you believe (as I do) that marriage is sacred (Mark 10:7-9) and that human sexuality is created and defined by God (Mark 10:6) – then perhaps it is unwise to identify with the BLM movement. This doesn’t mean Christians should drop the message; it simply means that we need to be careful and creative in how we share it.

One of my friends suggested that we adopt the slogan BLMBALM: “Black Lives Matter Because All Lives Matter.” It’s not exactly ideal as a bumper sticker, but otherwise I think he might be on to something!

## CONCLUSION

Evangelical Christians need to find a way to embrace the message (that black lives really do matter) without embracing the organization. And what better way to communicate that “black lives matter” than by actively listening to their stories and learning from their “lived experience.” It’s not hard, but it does take intentionality. Here are just some of the ways that we might seek to become more empathetic

friends, more compassionate neighbors, and more informed Christians when it comes to this profoundly important issue:

1. By reading from black Christian authors (such as “Black & Reformed” by Anthony J. Carter, “Reading While Black” by Esau McCaulley, “Fault Lines” by Voddie Baucham Jr., etc.)
2. By listening to black Christian musicians (such as Shai Linne, Sinach, Hezekiah Walker, Lecrae, etc.)
3. By sitting under black Christian preaching (such as Thabiti Anyabwile, H. B. Charles Jr., John Onwuchekwa, etc.)
4. By frequenting black establishments when possible
5. By not closing the door on potential conversations with unhelpful verbiage like “All Lives Matter”

Above all, this is a call for Christians to be a people of prayer. The “Black Lives Matter” message is so loud because our world is so broken. And, as Christians, we know that this is not ultimately a skin problem; it’s a sin problem. We are separated from God and from one another because of our sin, not because of our skin. Therefore, the only hope for peace and justice is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, while we pray for peaceful protests, police safety, safety for the protesters, accountability, fair trials, discerning jurors, and just verdicts, we must also be praying that God pierces the darkness with the blazing light of the gospel.

Church, God has given us “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). “We are ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:20). We are “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). May we not hide our light or abandon our calling when the need is so urgent and the opportunities are so great.

(Photo credit: Logan Stuck)

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