

EVAN 545: Black Lives Matter and the Gospel- Tamice N. Hasty

I grew up in the home of two Hampton University Alumnus. From a young age, I heard stories of the immense pressures they faced from within and from without as they sought to make something of themselves and to achieve a life that had only ever been a dream for their parents and their grandparents. My paternal grandparents were graduates of Morgan State University and their stories contained even more intrigue and substance than those of my mother and my father. From a young age, I sensed that something was wrong with the world. I felt a sense in my black suburbanized preteen years that I didn't quite fit in and it bothered me. I had seen the tapes of Rodney King and the scenes of burning cars and buildings. I had heard adults that were much older than me say alarming things about the O.J. Simpson verdict. I pondered where it all came from and why the tensions were so high. I wondered why my teachers sneered and my parents wept. These questions were strangely quieted when I met Jesus as a teenager. I was saved by grace and for some reason the answer to those questions that had plagued my young mind, didn't seem to matter quite so much anymore. Then, Trayvon Martin died.

In an unsolicited rush, those questions resurfaced and I wondered after 9 years of following Jesus whether my faith could provide any answers that could satisfy. Did the Jesus I had come to love and to whom I had pledged my entire life have anything to say about this pain I was experiencing? How did He feel about this rage that began to boil on the inside of me? My journey of having those questions answered will form the content of this paper and I am hoping that as some young person who loves God but who also watched Philando Castile bleed to death in front of his girlfriend and daughter could be encouraged by some of the answers that have served to comfort me.

For my cultural trend, I chose the Black Lives Matter Movement. Black Lives Matter started in 2012 when three black, female, community organizers: Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza heard the news of George Zimmerman's acquittal. George Zimmerman was a self-appointed neighborhood watch enforcer who fatally shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in a Florida suburb. Trayvon was followed, harassed and murdered by Zimmerman for "looking suspicious". Martin was wearing a hoodie and was unarmed at the time Zimmerman approached him. When police arrived on the scene the story came out that while watching television with his family, Trayvon had gone to the corner store for a snack (skittles and an iced tea). He was shot to death upon returning to his house. Seeing that Zimmerman was not held accountable for his crime, Garza, Cullors and Tometi took to the streets and to the internet. What started out as a hashtag, would soon become a grassroots phenomenon and eventually a nationwide movement.

In an interview with Hot 97 radio show, Patrisse Cullors said "the origin of Black Lives Matter is deep love and black rage, the acquittal of George Zimmerman and what that means for society. We looked and we saw that there was a need to intervene because we knew that the consequences of not intervening would be far greater than those of that particular moment." So at its inception, #BlackLivesMatter began as nothing more than an outcry in response to the anti-black racism that the ladies felt permeated American society and American movements. No one knew that in the wake of Trayvon, the subsequent deaths of Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, and Eric Garner would bear such striking resemblance to the atrocities surrounding the miscarriage of Justice in the Martin/Zimmerman case. The systematic and routine execution of unarmed black men coupled with the non-indictments of those who took their lives created the climate for the explosion of what would quickly become the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The black lives matter movement is now a national, chapter-based organization that seeks to among other things, validate and celebrate black life. It is described by Alicia Garza as "an ideological and political intervention in a world where black lives are systemically and intentionally targeted for demise". It has taken the nation by storm and the nation has had no choice but to respond. It seems very clear that the movement has no intention of stopping until the government responds to its demands.

BLM has made itself a force to be reckoned with in the sense that no one living in America is unfamiliar with the hashtag. Furthermore, there have been both positive and negative responses to the hashtag itself even to the point of other groups promoting rival hashtags in order to weaken and critique the original. Some groups responded by propagating the #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter campaigns. These groups inadvertently trivialize the very meaning and purpose of the statement and mistakenly miss the entire premise. The use of the phrase "black lives matter" has been controversial and even polarizing in today's society. But it has also served to spark some much needed and long overdue discussion and commentary from the pulpit to the parlor and on virtually every social media platform. Since the inception of the movement there have been even more black people gunned down and mishandled by law enforcement officers and the social climate has begun to reach a temperature that feels impossible to escape and even more impossible to ignore. 2016 and the tensions we feel are reminiscent

of another pivotal time in black and American history.

Most of the criticisms of the black lives matter movement have to do with its similarity to the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and other militant black liberation groups. In my study of both movements I saw some striking similarities as well as stark differences that I found important to note. The struggle for civil rights really began in the period after the civil war known as reconstruction, but the more acclaimed and recognized aspects of that struggle took place in the twenty some odd years between 1954 until around 1974. In order to have a thorough appreciation for Black Lives Matter and in order to combat what I feel is at times, an over generous comparison of one movement to the other, I will attempt to paint a picture of the world behind the text, the world that led up to BLM.

An unarmed 17-year-old boy has just been murdered. Only this time it is Oakland California, it's 1968 and this boy's name is Bobby Hutton, not Trayvon Martin. Bobby had been hiding behind a house with his mentor Eldridge Cleaver amidst gunfire from the police who have invaded their neighborhood in an attempt to quell the riots that were ensuing. The city of Oakland was in an uproar following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr and the two men found themselves in the middle of a shootout. As Bobby and Eldridge find themselves surrounded with no way out, Cleaver tells the young boy to strip. The logic behind this exhortation was the fact that Cleaver knew if they surrendered wearing any clothes the police would shoot them and say they had been armed. As Cleaver and Hutton attempt to surrender, Bobby Hutton is shot 12 times and killed immediately, wearing nothing but his underwear. The news reports that followed were verbatim to Cleaver's warning. Eldridge Cleaver had been far too familiar with this scenario in fact it was the impetus for his decision to be the spokesperson for the Black Panther Party for self-defense alongside co-founders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. Seale and Newton had formed the party in response to the police killing of Matthew Johnson an unarmed 16 year old boy in San Francisco in 1966. Johnson had been shot in the back while in a student community center.

The Black Panther image was originally a mere logo on a voting ballot in Alabama before it ever symbolized a militant liberationist group. Lowndes county Alabama was 80% black and had been faced with extreme violence from white land owners at the time that Stokely Carmichael and SNCC showed up with their message of "Black Power". They called each member of the community to take advantage of their voting rights and to vote for black candidates who belonged to the newly formed Lowndes County Freedom Organization or LCFO for short. Because many of the folks couldn't read, the image of a black panther was used to denote the contrast between the other animal images they were used for racist political parties in Alabama. When Bobby Seale and Huey Newton formed the Panther Party for self-defense in Oakland in 1966, they adopted the image and made it a national emblem. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense began to formulate national chapters across the nation.

The black power message took off as leaders of SNCC began to see that while Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC were fighting for access and opportunity, civil rights without economic and political rights were actually just dead rights. King feared that if the tactic of non-violence he'd fought for until the end didn't illicit a governmental and societal response, the young people would shift and take up a tactic of violence to get their point across. However, the tragic misunderstanding of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was that it was only recognized for the image of black people with large afros, leather jackets and guns. The Black Panther Party was much more than that. While they did feel the need to bear arms in order to protect black and brown bodies from police brutality in public spaces, they also launched very successful social programs in addition to that. They believed that they needed a grounded attack against things that helped to create inequalities. To combat the political, social and economic inequalities they launched free breakfast programs for the nourishment and education of young children in the community. They wrote a ten point manifesto that articulated the motivation and desires of the party. They called it their "Ten Point Program". The list included the following:

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.
2. We want full employment for our people.
3. We want an end to the robbery by the white men of our Black Community. (later changed to "we want an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our black and oppressed communities.")
4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.
5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society.
6. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.
7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people.
8. We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.
9. We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black Communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.
10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.

It is an unfair assessment to look at this party as solely existing to terrorize and create violence.

There were a lot of similar threads across all of the organizations during the civil rights movement. It seems more accurate to say that there was one movement, which consisted of several streams, one purpose and end, by different means.

Author Peniel Joseph has pointed to the Black Panthers being an equal and yet parallel part of the Civil Rights movement. Most people unfairly dichotomize the struggle of MLK Jr. with those of Malcolm X or Stokely Carmichael or the Black Panther Party. In an essay called *State of the Field*, Joseph writes:

Given the overwhelmingly negative images associated with black power, efforts to define it have largely been arbitrary. Until recently, perspectives on the movement were shaped primarily by the memory of those who saw it only as an angry response to the slow pace of the struggle for civil rights. Not surprisingly, a clear working definition of black power has proven elusive, especially since it was so often viewed as the civil rights movement's "evil" twin. (Peniel E. Joseph, *Black Power Movement: State of the Field*. Joseph, Peniel E. (December, 2009))

The Black Panther Party began to dissipate after the leadership within the party were infiltrated by FBI informants, key leaders were jailed, exiled or assassinated. The real demise came when the three founders were pitted against one another in terms of the direction of the Movement in 1974 and members began to leave the Party. Up until the point of its demise, the Black Panther Party was quite popular among young people. Seeing black people armed for self defense and unafraid. Seeing them well versed in the law and equally articulate. Seeing them take care and thought for the sociopolitical needs of the poor blacks in urban ghettos resonated on a deep level and served to stave the pain and helplessness they felt if even for only a short time.

In "What We Want" Stokely Carmichael gives the best and most succinct statement for how the non-violent movement of King became what it was after he was assassinated. He writes:

One of the tragedies of the struggle against racism is that up to now there has been no national organization, which could speak to the growing militancy of young black people in the urban ghetto. There has been only a civil rights movement, whose tone of voice was adapted to an audience of liberal whites. It served as a sort of buffer zone between them and angry young blacks. None of its so-called leaders could go into a rioting community and be listened to. In a sense, I blame ourselves—together with the mass media—for what has happened in Watts, Harlem, Chicago, Cleveland, Omaha. Each time the people in those cities saw Martin Luther King get slapped, they became angry; when they saw four little black girls bombed to death, they were angrier; and when nothing happened, they were steaming. We had nothing to offer that they could see, except to go out and be beaten again. We helped to build their frustration. For too many years, black Americans marched and had their heads broken and got shot. They were saying to the country, "Look, you guys are supposed to be nice guys and we are only going to do what we are supposed to do—why do you beat us up, why don't you give us what we ask, why don't you straighten yourselves out?" After years of this, we are at almost the same point—because we demonstrated from a position of weakness. We cannot be expected any longer to march and have our heads broken in order to say to whites: come on, you're nice guys. For you are not nice guys. We have found you out.

An organization, which claims to speak for the needs of a community—as does the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—must speak in the tone of that community, not as somebody else's buffer zone. This is the significance of black power as a slogan. For once, black people are going to use the words they want to use—not just the words whites want to hear. And they will do this no matter how often the press tries to stop the use of the slogan by equating it with racism or separatism. (Stokely Carmichael, "What We Want," *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 7 (September 22, 1966), pp. 5-6)

These words from Carmichael are chilling as we see that some of the same questions are being raised today with black youth and with the black lives matter movement. In more covert and systemic ways the same struggles are being faced in our communities even now in 2016. However, we live in a very different world today and because of this, the way in which a movement starts and can be sustained is quite different. The start of the Black Lives Matter movement is terrifyingly similar to the start of the Black Panther party but the world in front of BLM is quite different.

It was quite clear that the Black Panther Party wanted to actually overthrow the United States government. They actually thought it could be done. J. Edgar Hoover proved them wrong and so in light of that reality Black Lives Matter has decided to take a different approach. Black Lives Matter does not seem to want to start revolution so much as to initiate and encourage reform. Their primary focus is

directly connected to police brutality and the cause of the marginalized. Black Lives Matter is not a political party and also has decentralized leadership. The main difference between BLM and BPP has to do with the focus on marginalized groups within the black community whereas the Black Panther party had very misogynistic underpinnings. The cause of Black Lives Matter if anything is the rebuild the black liberation movement. In the about us section of the Black Lives Matter website its states:

Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement. (www.blacklivesmatter.com/about)

We currently live in a world that is privy to the struggle for civil rights and that creates a situation and opportunity for people to grasp that racism and white supremacy is not impossible. We are not so far removed that people cannot see how damaging those sentiments can be and that I feel, gives more place to a movement like BLM, especially among young people. There also seems to be a real anti authority posture amongst young people, which lends itself to a case for the exposing and condemning of police brutality. In addition to that, the social media aspect is both a help and a hindrance to a movement like BLM. The attention span and headline driven nature of information nowadays can lead to shallow engagement and sporadic outrage which can foster a non-committal posture when trying to get anything done. On the other hand, social media and camera phones do more for international and national attention given to events that happen. At no other time in history can millions of people watch a black man die on a live Facebook feed at the same time. This can be such a helpful tool in terms of rallying individuals for a cause as well as some level of accountability. The outrage that has led to rioting in the streets has come directly from watching police shoot or choke a black man to death and not be held accountable for it.

As I mentioned in my introduction, as a young person I could see the injustice in the world and I knew instinctively that something was wrong. I had always been drawn to the Black Liberationist Groups I heard my parents talk about. I felt anger and helplessness and I had questions. However, when I became a Christian my faith began to take center stage and questions about race and justice seem to take a back seat. I hadn't ever heard a pastor or teacher speak about these things and they seemed unimportant. Christianity was about believing the right things and getting to heaven. The gospel was about convincing people they were sinners and getting them to accept Jesus in their hearts.

In 2012 after years of micro aggression and unanswered questions with my largely white discipleship experience, something within me snapped. I had started to read the gospel from a different perspective and I realized that there is an enormous amount of social implication in the gospel. I had begun to see Jesus in a new light and I felt his comforting presence as I mourned the death of Trayvon Martin.

As the reports of Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, John Crawford, Rekia Boyd, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland and the most recent reports of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile came in I felt determined to investigate my faith and what the gospel means to those who are feeling the pain and the madness in our time as it relates to police brutality.

In Luke 4, Jesus introduces his public ministry and he quotes Isaiah 61. As the servant of the Lord He proclaims: The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. It became clear to me that the gospel is fully explained or presented if it doesn't include aspects of restoration and social justice. I had been taught that caring about those things was liberal, but I came to understand that true Christianity is not expressed without it.

The gospel of Jesus needs to be incarnated and applied to broken systems of injustice today. As far as it relates to Black Lives Matter, the truth of what the gospel stands for in no different than the truth of what Cullors, Tompkins and Garza stand for in the declaration. As Christians we believe in the value and the dignity of all live, we believe in justice for the marginalized, we stand for righteousness and truth.

I feel that the message of Christianity and the message Black Lives Matter are not complete messages without intersection. In fact, I don't believe that Black Lives Matter sentiment originated with those three women. I believe that this has always been true in the heart of Jesus, what is bothersome has been that the church was late the party in its profession. What I have realized is that in becoming flesh Jesus fully identified with humanity and as believers we are to follow in His footsteps.

Jesus fully assumed full humanity and as believers we are to follow in His footsteps.

While many believers have been resistant to BLM, I believe that we can look no further than the incarnation to speak to its validity. After all, the incarnation is the witness that God can be veiled in a form that is despised, even offensive. Jesus showed us that unfading glory can be passed over because the container in which it is held is less than to be desired. The embodiment of truth Himself can be manifested in a form so unrecognizable, that it can be held and nursed by a young woman and also ripped to shreds by the very hands He fashioned. The incarnation gives us permission to look for Jesus anywhere and everywhere...especially in the unexpected places. It is our job upon finding Him, to point Him out and invite others to behold Him.

No desire for justice...no cry for shalom...no longing for righteousness exists anywhere or in anyone that did not first originate within the heart of the Creator. As believers part of our marching orders are to respond to that cry and direct it back to its original impetus. But we have to get close enough to the cry in order to actually hear it. Just like He did. Publishing a hashtag and joining the cause of BLM is not about allegiance with everything a particular movement may stand for. It's about recognition.

Recognition and acknowledgement that that cry was in the heart of Jesus way before it ever appeared on Facebook. That is the message we bring to the world and more importantly that is the message we should model. When engaging seekers who have the same questions, I believe these truths will go a long way.