

**“The Truth Is Always Relevant”:
Race and Economics in Contemporary African American Preaching¹**

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Abstract: *Through activating and empowering preaching in the mid 20th century, though admittedly by a few, the civil rights movement flourished and brought significant change to American society. Addressing the need for preaching on race and economics in the contemporary African American community, this article explores how the church can engage, assist, and reach Millennials, who seek the reemergence of mass social justice movements. If the church does not address race and economics, or is not thoughtful and skilled in addressing these issues, Millennials will consider the church not relevant to their needs and struggles. Will the relevance of 21st century sermons and churches be obvious and empowering to the mass social justice movements of today?*

To be black and conscious in America is to be in a constant state of rage.
James Baldwin

The hip-hop and business mogul Jay-Z, in his critically acclaimed and surprisingly exegetical tour de force, *Decoded*, makes this penetrating statement:

. . . for hip hop to grow to its potential and stay relevant for another generation we have to keep pushing deeper and deeper into the biggest subjects and doing it with real honesty. The truth is always relevant.²

The context of Jay-Z’s comments is that he believes musical genres can die because they lose their “signature and vitality,” and other musical forms “steal their fire,” and ultimately these genres will go the way of disco and the blues. Some would debate the demise of the blues, but his point is if hip-hop is to stay relevant to another generation, it must push deeper and deeper into the biggest subjects with real honesty. Jay-Z’s insightful maxim is that facing the biggest subjects with real depth and honesty brings truth—and truth is always relevant.

I teach preaching and I have applied Jay-Z’s statement to churches, seminaries, and denominations that are trying to figure out how to stay relevant amidst the painful decline of mainline churches and religious institutions in a post-modern culture that is increasingly secular, diverse, and non-traditional. For many Millennials and Gen-Xers, the church is not a priority; and, as a result, white American Millennials are non-affiliating in alarmingly large numbers. My paraphrase of Jay-Z is to suggest that churches, seminaries, and denominations must push deeper and deeper into the biggest subjects, with real honesty. Otherwise, irrelevance pushes religious institutions further to the fringe of culture and society, and eventually to the place of anachronism.

¹ For review of this essay within a fuller treatment of black preaching, see Frank Thomas’ upcoming book, *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching*, to be released published by Abingdon Press, Fall 2016.

² Jay-Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2011), 277.

If irrelevance pushed religious institutions to the fringe of society, at least some of that irrelevance is a result of the preaching. If preaching does not engage the biggest subjects with real depth and honesty, then preaching itself will go the way of disco, and for Jay-Z, the blues. Black preaching will go the way of the comedic caricatures that television shows and movies characterize, such as in *The Blues Brothers*. Preaching and preachers will only be respected for their comedic entertainment as emotional relief, or for ceremonial chaplaincy in invocations, weddings, funerals, dire emergencies, and in time of crisis such as terrorism. Neither preaching nor preachers will be consulted or valued for the most important ongoing civic, social, political, economic, and spiritual issues in the lives of young people. If the church does not move from exclusion to inclusion and diversity, from insistence on gradualism and patience to sensing urgency, from charismatic leadership to collaboration, from a focus on appeasing the white majority and conservative ideology in the church and nation to listening and responding positively to the pain, hurt, anger, and activism of young people and new movements, then the church will be a relic and holdover from an old worldview that refuses to face new 21st century flattened hierarchies and consensus building.

In this article, I want to discuss the relevancy of the church through its preaching to this present generation of young African American people. Youth in the black church by and large still remain in the African American church, unlike youth in the majority population. They have identified their major concerns as police violence, brutality, and accountability, or as some have said, “the right to not die prematurely,” which are intricately and ultimately connected to issues of race and economics. How then does the church remain relevant?

After witnessing the killing of so many unarmed young black men and women by police, and in several cases non-police, young people are saying clearly and loudly, “enough is enough.” They have formed their own dispersed movement, most visibly known as Black Lives Matter, but with many other coalitions and organizations as well, such as Dream Defenders, Coalition Against Police Violence, Black Youth Project 100, Tribe X, and Lost Voices. And not just within the borders of the United States, Black Lives Matter has become a global movement stretching to Palestine, Canada, and Ghana. As Janaya Khan says:

Black Lives Matter has become a transformative outlet for all black people from different historical, cultural, socioeconomic and political identities. It is a source of solidarity for the survivors of colonization, exploitation, capitalism and police brutality.³

In turn, churches must question if religious institutions, inclusive of denominations and seminaries, are relevant to these organizations. How relevant is our preaching in black churches to this movement? And, if a preacher wants to be relevant to this movement how and what would the preacher preach? Let’s begin by contrasting the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s with our present new movement of primarily African American young people.

Civil Rights Movement and the New Movement

Many references compare the new movement to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Through dynamic and relevant preaching that empowered activism, the civil rights movement flourished, broke the back of segregation, and brought significant change to American

³ Janaya Khan, “Black Lives Matter Has Become a Global Movement,” *The Root*, August 7, 2015, accessed November 11, 2015, http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2015/08/black_lives_matter_has_become_a_global_movement.html.

society. It is virtually indisputable that preaching was central and vital to the civil rights movement. While the preaching and addresses of Martin Luther King Jr. almost exclusively foreground such consideration, many other preachers activated people to make change. Gifted preachers surrounded King—including among them Prathia Hall, Wyatt Tee Walker, Joseph Lowry, Andrew Young, Gardner C. Taylor, Walter E. Fauntroy, Jesse Jackson, C.T. Vivian, Ralph Abernathy, etc. While other civil rights campaigns with other organizations worked extensively, the media largely focused on King.

It is also important to acknowledge that not all African American churches were involved in civil rights. Though the black church's participation in the civil rights movement is claimed today by the vast majority of African American preachers and churches, many preachers were silent from their pulpits, and some were critical of King and the civil rights movement. The most vivid example of such opposition is J. H. Jackson, the president of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., from 1953–1982, the largest predominantly African-American Christian denomination in the United States, and the world's second largest Baptist denomination. Jackson consistently, publicly, and vociferously advocated against the civil rights movements. A small minority of preachers, black, white, Jewish, and otherwise led the chorus for change, which came to be known as the civil rights movement.

Within the struggles for civil rights, tensions and tussles emerged between younger leaders and the older and more traditional leaders, King in particular. The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had tremendous public conflicts with King and others about tactics and what SNCC acknowledged as the hierarchical leadership of King and his associates, even as they derisively called King “De Lawd.” Besides conflicts with SNCC, the role of non-violence was one of the biggest struggles in the black community between King and the church and the nationalistic and black power tactics represented by Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam, and other such groups. Stokely Carmichael, also known as Kwame Ture, in 1966, was the leader of SNCC, and launched the phrase “Black Power” in national consciousness seeking to force King to take a position for black power. Nationalists and black power advocates did not agree with the tactics of moral suasion and appealing to the conscience of white America, since, in their opinion, that tactic had been tried without results for centuries since the beginning of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. They believed that black pride, self-determination, self-protection, and self-economics would yield African Americans the respect due to them as citizens of the United States of America. This present tension between younger, more nationalist and aggressive leadership of the new movement and older, more traditional and patient approaches of the church is not by any means new. It has been debated since the advent of black struggles for freedom and, as it will be debated into the foreseeable future.

Acknowledging that these same tensions exist today in the contemporary moment, let's look at what might be the most significant subjects in the new movement that require the levels of depth and honesty with which Jay-Z speaks for the church to be relevant for Millennials and Gen-Xers. Let's search for the truth that is always relevant.

The Bigger Subjects for Millennials and Gen-Xers

The acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting death of the African American teenager Trayvon Martin re-ignited the issue of violence against black youth and galvanized outrage and mass protests. The issue of violence against black people and black youth has always been a critical issue that has never been far below the surface of concern and activism in the black community. We can trace protests in opposition to violence against blacks from and

through the epoch of slavery and fugitive slave laws, the era of Jim Crow segregation and lynching, the period of the war on drugs, to this present time of the new Jim Crow, the mass incarceration of black people. Throughout American history, blacks have resisted state-sponsored and state sanctioned terrorism, murder, brutality, and violence by slave patrols, night watches, sheriffs, police, and vigilante and para-police violence (i.e. riot mobs, lynch mobs, White Citizen Councils, the Klan, etc.).

We have protested these issues for redress in so many ways and instances that I can mention only a few in the 20th century. Billie Holiday sang “Strange Fruit,” protesting the violence and inhumanity of lynching: “Southern trees bear a strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root, Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”⁴ In “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” Gil Scott-Heron said: “There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers in the instant replay. There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers in the instant replay.”⁵ The Black Panthers listed in their “10-Point Program,” “We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people.”⁶ NWA stirred major cultural polemics by controversial lyrics of protesting police brutality and racial profiling in late 1980s and 90s. Constitution, state, and court sanctioned over-policing, and para-policing, of the black community has been an ongoing and continued issue of tension and struggle for generation upon generation in the black community.

But the acquittal of George Zimmerman was a tipping point beyond what many young people could bear in the contemporary moment of the black freedom struggle. A movement emerged around the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media. One year after the acquittal of Zimmerman, Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, who fired 12 times at an unarmed teenager. When a grand jury announced that Officer Darren Wilson would face no indictment, the movement against police violence grew in greater intensity and fervor. A further rash of deaths of unarmed young black people, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson, Rekia Boyd, Walter Scott, and Eric Garner, to name a few, proved the nature of structural racism, violence, and brutality had to be reformed. Protests launched diverse acts of defiance. Bree Newsome climbed a flagpole to bring down a confederate flag after the killing of nine people by a racist young man in Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Charleston, South Carolina. Undeniably, many young black people in America are in a state of protest, and have formed their own 21st-century movement without consultation of traditional civil rights groups such as Rainbow Push, Social Action Network, NAACP, The Urban League, etc.

Rahiel Tesfamariam, social activist and former columnist for *The Washington Post*, wearing a representative T-shirt that said: “This Ain’t Yo Mama’s Civil Rights Movement,” was arrested in Ferguson, Missouri, in an act of civil disobedience for blocking the entrance to the St. Louis federal court. Such acts summarize the new movement:

⁴ Billie Holliday, “Strange Fruit,” accessed December 1, 2015, http://www.lyricsfreak.com/b/billie+holiday/strange+fruit_20017859.html.

⁵ Gil Scott-Heron, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/the-revolution-will-not-be-televised-lyrics-gil-scottheron.html>.

⁶ “10 Point Platform,” in *A Huey Newton Story*, Arlington, VA: Public Broadcasting Network, 2002. *PBS*, accessed June 1, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/hueypnewton/>.

In the streets of Ferguson and Baltimore, the new movement for black lives was radicalized by legions of poor and working-class youth who forced the nation to grapple with black rage. They fearlessly confronted a militarized police force, tear gas, snipers and tanks designed for warfare. . . . These young people, including countless women and LGBTQ people who have organized many of the movement's most powerful acts of resistance, have changed the predominant image of black activism in America.⁷

As stated earlier, though the new movement is diverse, the public face of the movement tends to be Black Lives Matter. Representative of this new movement, in a September PBS-Marist poll, 59% of white Americans said that Black Lives Matter is a distraction and, in response to a separate question, 41% said it advocates violence (16% said they were unsure whether it does).⁸ In my discussions with young activists, I hear that it does not matter—that is, white American's response to the new movement. They expect such, given the long history of structural racism, denial, and violence perpetrated against black people in America. While appreciating any support from any quarter in American society, including Whites and other minorities, they are self-determined and not looking for the approval of whites to establish their agenda. The most important question for this discussion then is, how will the church-at-large respond to this movement? How will the black church respond to this movement? What will we preach? Will we push deeper and deeper into these bigger subjects with real honesty and search for truth?

In an article entitled, “Why Black Lives Should Matter to the Church,” Brittany Pashcall states:

Statistically, 87% of African Americans identify closely with a religious group. Similarly, 84% of Latin Americans identify closely with a religious group. This means that a large majority of those most frequently targeted for injustice occupy a pew on Sunday morning.⁹

As we said from the outset, more white Millennials, known as “nones” (those that check the “none” box when asked to state their religious affiliation) are leaving the church. Alan Bean, in an article entitled “Why (White) Millennials Are Leaving the Church,” suggests that people of color comprise only one-third of American Millennials, and they represent over half of Millennial Christians.¹⁰ Bean suggests that Millennials love the Jesus portrayed in the Bible, who preached good news to the poor, and the upside down kingdom, where “the first shall be last and

⁷ Rahiel Tefarmaiam, “Why the Modern Civil Rights Movement Keeps Religious Leaders at Arm's Length,” *The Washington Post*, September 18, 2015, accessed November 16, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-black-activism-lost-its-religion/2015/09/18/2f56fc00-5d6b-11e5-8e9e-dce8a2a2a679_story.html.

⁸ Simon Sebastian, “Don't Criticize Black Lives Matter for Provoking Violence. The Civil Rights Movement Did, Too,” *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2015, accessed November 15, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/10/01/dont-criticize-black-lives-matter-for-provoking-violence-the-civil-rights-movement-did-too/>.

⁹ Brittany Paschall, “Why Black Lives Should Matter to the Church,” *Unashamed Impact Blog*, October 19, 2015, accessed October 21, 2015, <http://unashamedimpact.com/blog/why-black-lives-should-matter-to-the-church>.

¹⁰ Alan Bean, “Why (White) Millennials Are Leaving the Church,” Arlington, TX: *Friends of Justice*, 2014, accessed October 15, 2015, <https://friendsofjustice.wordpress.com/2014/12/20/why-white-millennials-are-leaving-the-church>.

the last shall be first.” Bean suggests that Millennials “hear vague references to justice, caring for the poor, and feeding the hungry in many white churches, but the systematic roots of injustice, poverty and hunger are rarely explored.”¹¹ Because most white churches find these teachings and their challenge to the core structures of American life to be so polemical in the congregation, they ignore as much of it as they can, or “ratchet up the machinery of denial” and frequently remain silent. The cognitive dissonance is too much for white Millennials and so they leave the church. Bean argues the black church is only slightly better since most minorities take the rough outlines of their theology from white Christians. What forces black churches to be slightly more political is that “bad public policy has such a devastating impact in poor communities of color.”¹² He says, “There is just enough of the Jesus stuff in America’s Black and Latino churches to sustain the commitment of a restless Millennial generation.”¹³ Frustrated by what they hear and see in their church community, there is enough social justice and a “dash of genuine Jesus-religion” to keep them coming.

Even though Black Millennials are still coming, there are serious tensions between the black church and the new movement Millennials. Heretofore, the church has been the center of black America’s struggle for civil rights. At the center of the black church has been traditional values, hierarchical male leadership, doctrinal opposition to the LGBTQ community, the politics of accommodation and respectability, and non-violence and reconciliation. These traditional values are significant subjects that we must engage with real depth and honesty in order to find the truth. What is at stake in the church’s response is if the black church is, or will ever be again, the main institution of black life and relevant to the needs and concerns of this new movement.

Tension Points Between the New Movement and the Church

There are at least four principal tension points between the new movement and the church: the historical straight male leadership of the church, the disruptive tactics of the new movement, identification with and practice of black theology, and new movement proficiency with technology. Let us turn more explicitly now to these tension points.

Tension One: The Historical Straight Male Leadership of the Church

For the most part, historically within the black church, women have been subordinated and restricted, and the LGBTQ community has been ostracized and muted. The new movement demands the inclusion of women and the LGBTQ community as equal voices and partners. For example, women in the new movement have predominately focused on violence against black men after the death of Sandra Bland. As such, the hashtag #sayhername emerged, and the new movement addressed the issue of full inclusion of the protest of police violence against women and girls, and also violence against transgender women. These key tenets of the new movement run counter to overwhelming claims of church doctrine on homosexuality, which many clergy and theologians believe is a social sin, and the almost lackluster inclusion of women in leadership and decision-making positions in church hierarchies.

The new movement does rely upon a centralized charismatic leadership—that is, a single person who is accepted as the model of church leadership, whether that leader is female or male. A majority of this elder leadership has insisted that the new movement appoint leaders, tone

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

down the rhetoric, utilize less confrontational tactics and come to the negotiating table. However, many in the movement consider this model of leadership outdated. If nothing else, history has taught that the leader can be assassinated and the movement severely is debilitated. Besides the risk of assassination, often in the charismatic sole leadership paradigm, black male preachers are propped up as figureheads and friends of those in political power and produce nothing for the black community other than their celebrity, as evidenced by front seats at funerals, church, and sporting events, television coverage, and shows, or becoming the go-to authority about racial issues for the mainstream media. The new movement is clear about the kind of leadership they do not want. They do not want the church to arbitrate the narrative of their emerging movement and thus have abandoned the church's model of leadership. Without change, the church runs the risk of irrelevance to 21st century political change.

Tension Two: Disruptive Tactics of the New Movement

While the church based civil rights movement was anchored in non-violent resistance strategies and moral suasion, the new movement is more confrontational, disrupting political rallies, sporting events, and shopping malls on holidays, not to mention morning and evening commutes. They are willing to “shut it down,” with dispersed and hashtag organized protest movements around the country. Their model is not the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), but rather the Black Panther Party. They openly declare, “Black Power,” wear natural hair, fists in the air, with clothing, apparel, signs, and symbols unapologetically announcing and celebrating blackness. The church, for the most part, has not been as radical in its rhetoric and tactics. Often for the church, Black Power has connotations of violence and separatism, and the church has operated from the sphere of accommodation, assimilation, negotiation, and change from within the power structures. Alternatively, the new movement is non-conciliatory in their righteous rage. They report that they have grown up disappointed with the gods of Generation X and the failure of political courage in the hip-hop generation. Their ultimate faith is in themselves to be agents of change, and admittedly they suggest that it might turn out to be hubris. Again, what is clear, Tesfamariam says:

they will not invest in a nation-state project that hands them black presidents alongside dead unarmed black boys in the street. These are irreconcilable contradictions. And these are non-conciliatory times.¹⁴

Tension Three: Identification With and Practice of Black Theology

From the perspective of the new movement, the church's deeply conservative theology and practice has led to a disconnection from social issues in the pursuit of personal success and affirmation, as suggested by the popular prosperity and celebrity preacher gospel doctrines, “get your personal blessing, breakthrough, and miracle theology.” By and large, new movement young people ask, “What has happened to Jesus as a freedom fighter, liberator, community organizer, proclaimer of freedom from the captives, and revolutionary?” Where is the blending of substantive theology with real and astute political critique?

Traditionally our pulpit preaching has focused on freedom from sin, coupled with an aversion to homosexuality, affirmation of heteronormative male leadership, and Jesus as a life coach to help make you healthy, wealthy, and wise—that is, without any mention or challenge of structural racism to have good health, great relationships, and financial stewardship. Most

¹⁴ Tesfamariam.

employ a conservative theology of personal salvation that rarely addresses racism and structural oppression and liberation of the oppressed. This problem exists not only among white churches, but also among many black churches that accept the theological outlines of white theology.

Tension Four: Technological Proficiency of the New Movement

The new movement is diffuse, less centralized, and more collaborative because information is accessible to all and based upon the mobilizing force of social media. The world took notice of social media's ability to mobilize grassroots movements such as the Arab spring and Occupy. The new movement is proving again what Todd Wolfson, author of *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left*, said: "The Cyber Left is about flattening hierarchies, flattening governance processes, combined with using the logic of social networks for deep consensus building."¹⁵

Some social networking statistics are stark for the new movement and suggest that young, black Americans use social networking sites significantly: "[96%] of African-American Internet users, aged 18-29, use a social network of some kind. Forty per cent [sic] of the same group, say they use Twitter—12% more than the comparable figure for young white people."¹⁶ Based upon young African American's increased social media usage, the social media emphasis of the new movement is effective in the creation of a liberation agenda:

The new movement is powerful yet diffuse, linked not by physical closeness or even necessarily by political consensus, but by the mobilizing force of social media. A hashtag on Twitter can link the disparate fates of unarmed black men shot down by white police in a way that transcends geographical boundaries and time zones. A shared post on Facebook can organize a protest in a matter of minutes. Documentary photos and videos can be distributed on Tumblr pages and Periscope feeds, through Instagrams and Vines. Power lies in a single image. Previously unseen events become unignorable.¹⁷

Through the use of social media, the new movement is quick and adept in shaping its own narrative. While national and cable news outlets have their own perspectives, new movement people on the scene are sharing their perspectives on social media, often presenting sometimes a very different picture. Instantly the movement can write its own story anywhere, anytime. In comparison, most churches are not as social media literate and therefore are more dependent on national and cable news.

The Church and the New Movement

The four tensions between the new movement and the church underscore critical questions for preaching and religious institutions. Are religious institutions, inclusive of denominations and seminaries, relevant to these organizations? How relevant is preaching in black churches to this movement? And, if a preacher wanted to be relevant to this movement how and what would the preacher preach? Having now established these bigger subjects that require real depth and honesty, I want to discuss the aforementioned four areas of tension in regard to the church and its

¹⁵ As cited in Elizabeth Day, "#BlackLivesMatter: The Birth of a New Civil Rights Movement," *The Guardian*, July 15, 2015, accessed December 3, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/19/blacklivesmatter-birth-civil-rights-movement#img-2>.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Day, "#BlackLivesMatter: The Birth of a New Civil Rights Movement."

¹⁷ Ibid.

preaching's relevance. What is at stake is if the black church is, or will ever be again, the main institution of black life and relevant to the needs and concerns of all of its constituency groups? Our main goal is truth, because as Jay-Z claims, truth is always relevant. Let's start with a discussion of the tension of black theology and disruptive tactics.

Black Theology and Disruptive Tactics

There are churches that the new movement mentions as relevant in their own writing about their movement (e.g., ministries like First Corinthian Baptist in New York City-Harlem; City of Refuge United Church of Christ in Oakland, California; and Community of Hope AME in Temple Hills, Maryland). Many more around the country are dedicated to the liberation-centered legacy of the black church, such as Trinity United Church of Christ and St. Sabina Catholic in Chicago, Illinois; Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, Inc., Empowerment Temple in Baltimore, Maryland; and Mt. Zion Church, Nashville, Tennessee, to name a few. Actually, numerous churches root themselves in black liberation theology, and fiercely believe that the church is a tool for the empowerment of the oppressed. Jesus, for these churches, is a freedom fighter, liberator, revolutionary, and challenger of the status quo. Churches such as these participate in the new movement in various ways, such as "Hoodie Sunday" when Trayvon Martin was killed, "die-in" marches, shouting "I Can't Breathe" following the death of Eric Garner, and the "Seven Last Words" services of black people killed by police. Several churches open their doors to tear gas victims and served as sanctuaries in Ferguson and Baltimore when conflict escalated between protesters and police. Clergy in both cities organized themselves, and held protest meetings in their churches and asked their members to participate in protest marches and support. In sum, these churches are connected in visceral and tangible action-oriented ways to the agenda and resolve of the new movement. And generally, we can conclude that if congregational support is happening, it is a reflection of the effective and relevant sermons preached from the pulpit. These preachers are preaching effectively about these issues and are inspiring their people into action.

While all of the above is true, the new movement is speaking prophetically to the black church, pointing toward its silence on issues such as mass-incarceration, urban gun violence, health and food deserts, and disparities of services in low income neighborhoods, etc. Factually, there are numerous churches that support the new movement; however, only a small number of churches engage in issues of social justice. The same was true in the 1950s and 60s; then, only a small minority adopted the civil rights movement agenda. The new movement speaks prophetically and challenges the church's lack of response to organized, structural, and systemic racial inequality in black neighborhoods. Many churches, if they address the issues at all, play it safe.

For young people of the new movement, playing it safe means, for example, churches speak to issues of militarized policing in black neighborhoods, but the goal is to placate, that is, affirm the sense of injustice, and disaffirm their right to a kind of righteous rage at the injustice itself. Playing it safe are comments from many pulpits, ideas in meetings, messages in sermons, requests in the media, and practices that ask the new movement to turn down its rage. In truth, white America is, and has always been, afraid and paranoid of black rage; and so is the respectable and conservative black church. Their goal of playing it safe is to allow the protesters to "let off steam," offer prayers over them, and then send them home in order to keep the false peace.

The church has difficulty with the rage of the new movement, just as the church has difficulty with the rage of Jesus in Matthew 21:2 and John 2:15. Jesus cleans the temple of moneychangers based on righteous rage and indignation—in the protest language of the new movement, “#ShutItDown.” The church is not comfortable with the rage of Jesus, and the rage that often produces burning buildings, violent language, disruption of business property, and the flow of commerce. It is possible to understand, sympathize, and feel the rage, and still not condone the violence that rage can produce! While not condoning violence, King said that riots are the language of the un-heard. He did not condone rage and the violence, but he understood it. Does the church understand it? Does the church try to understand it?

Can the church understand the rage of the new movement when it says a nation that does not protect its citizens should no longer be surprised when the citizens no longer believe in the idea of the nation itself? The larger context of this special issue of *Homiletic* addresses preaching on race and economics. A phrase from an earlier quote in this article brings race and economics front and center: “In the streets of Ferguson and Baltimore, the new movement for black lives was radicalized by legions of poor and working-class youth who forced the nation to grapple with black rage.” Do not miss the phrases of “legions of poor and working-class youth” and “black rage.”

I believe that every preacher who seeks to understand should read Patrick Sharkey’s *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of the Progress toward Racial Equality*.¹⁸ While researchers typically analyze the economic inequality/mobility of racial/ethnic groups by focusing on individual factors such as the home, family structure, human capital, or culture as affecting character, Sharkey rightly looks beyond the individual and the family to understand inequality/mobility in regard to the importance of place—that is, communities and neighborhoods—as sites for the transmission of racial inequality in the post-civil rights era. He believes that inequality is organized in and around space.

Sharkey argues the problem of urban poverty is not only that concentrated poverty has intensified and racial segregation has persisted, but also that those same families experience the consequences of living in disadvantaged neighborhoods over multiple generations. The ghetto is inherited. The problems and challenges of the urban ghetto have been experienced, and then passed on to children, which means generations of families experience the nation’s worst schools and most unhealthy and violent environments. Sharkey argues that white and black children grow up in entirely distinct environments. From the 1950s to 1970s, 4% of whites lived in neighborhoods with at least 20% poverty, compared to 62% of African Americans. In 1985 to 2000, it got even worse, with 2 out of 3 black children raised in neighborhoods with 20% poverty, compared to 6% of whites (13% worse for blacks and 2% worse for whites). It is devastating when 66% of African American children grow up in neighborhoods with at least 20% poverty and 31% of African American children live in neighborhoods with a poverty rate at 30%; these poverty rates far exceed those among white children). When one lives in a high poverty neighborhood that is economically depressed and therefore unhealthy and safe, there are few opportunities for mobility and success.¹⁹

Concentrations of violence go hand in hand with concentrations of poverty. Through extant maps of homicides in the city of Chicago, Sharkey demonstrates that entire sections of the city never know the most extreme form of violence—local homicide. In other neighborhoods,

¹⁸ See Patrick Sharkey, *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of the Progress toward Racial Equality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

such homicides are normative. This tragic reality is not the result of character deficiencies of poor families. Instead, it is because neighborhoods composed of primarily poor racial and ethnic minorities have been areas of severe disinvestment and abandonment for the most part of the past half century. Sharkey correctly contends:

If segregated neighborhoods with concentrated poverty had greater levels of political influence, amenities that are taken for granted in middle-class communities, quality public services and schools, a vibrant economic base, and effective policing, then segregation and the concentration of poverty would decline and would not necessarily be associated with gang activity, crime, and violence, teenage childbearing and high dropout rates, poor community health, joblessness, homelessness, and blight. The social problems that are prevalent in America's ghettos are the product of shortsighted policies, intentional efforts to isolate or exclude minority communities within cities, and major economic and demographic shifts.

Again, he makes the point that these problems are not the results of character deficiencies of the urban poor. Rather, there is systemic and societal neglect that makes the ghetto possible and even convenient. Can the church preach about this evil? Can we understand? I do not condone violence that is often the result of rage, but I do understand! This is the truth: we have abandoned certain neighborhoods and families, and then are surprised when they respond with destructive rage. Our ignorance and innocence is alarming when we announce, "we do not understand why they are burning their own neighborhoods." Admittedly, criminal elements and destructive fools take advantage of the opportunity to loot and make mayhem, but the majority of the people want what middle-class neighborhoods want—quality public services and schools, effective policing, jobs, and a vibrant economic base. And because no one has heard their cry, they respond with violence and rage!

Notwithstanding, a question remains: Does understanding these factors lead the church to positive and constructive involvement and action? If preaching does not lead to concrete action, then that preaching is safe. If the purpose of preaching is to support and sanction a blessed personal life within the context of the status quo—an unequal and flawed social and economic system—then that preaching is safe and not acceptable to this new movement. Millennials are seeking substantive theological reflection balanced by honest and true social critique that leads to engagement by the church and its leaders. They are looking for action and not safe words.

I am not condemning churches and suggesting that every church should preach black liberation theology, or that if churches are not directly involved in the new movement, they are not the church. My goal is not to fill this article with criticism based upon "shoulds," "oughts," and "musts" in order to manipulate people out of inactivity. Instead, what I am suggesting is that if you want to be relevant to these young people, then at the very minimum the preacher must preach and be honest about the rage. We must preach and offer critical theological reflection around Jesus throwing the moneychangers from the temple and passages that are supported by insightful social critique. If you want to reach these young people, you must find what is just in their cause and be honest about it.

It starts at the deepest levels of belief and conviction within each person. It takes honest self-reflection from each person to look at the ways that they are complicit, whether blissfully ignorant, naively innocent, callously indifferent, or willingly neglectful, and then engage oneself into the issues. The purpose here is not to lay a guilt trip on anyone or to assert what every

Christian and every black church should be doing. The worst thing in the world is to preach about such issues without some level of deep inner clarity and moral conviction. To preach about these issues out of ignorance and innocence is to do harm to oneself, one's congregation, and the new movement. If one preaches about it, it will be controversial in many places. If one preaches about it, it will not make everyone comfortable. If one preaches about it, one will be called unflattering names and some will not want to hear a word of it. To preach about it and couple it with effective action is to go against the grain of apathy and conformity and to swim upstream against the tide.

Some preachers and congregations are ready and poised for a social action agenda of systemic critique and mass protests. I would like to make a few comments to those who are not ready, and are in some kind of process possibly to get ready. In this circumstance, if you are going to preach about these issues, invite dialogue before and after the sermon, particularly if you think it is going to be controversial. Before the sermon, it might be possible to meet with Millennials in the church and those in the new movement, and dialogue with them. Bishop Joseph W. Walker III has a MAT (Millennial Advisory Team) that he meets with for ongoing discussion and input.²⁰ He describes the meetings as invaluable as they give input and tremendous suggestions to aid and assist his preaching. It is possible to be collaborative in the development of the sermon. Several Doctor of Ministry preaching programs in the country teach and advocate that laypeople be assembled and partner with preachers in the development and preaching of the sermon. We have a movement of "conversational preaching" in homiletics, a conversation that occurs before and after the sermon with Millennials. These conversations help Millennials learn about the sermon; these conversations also help Millennials to understand. The beautiful thing about this effort is that it creates room for mutual dialogue. In this environment, not only is it possible for Millennials to critique the church, but also the church can critique Millennials. It is not within the scope of this article for the church to offer a critique of Millennials, but there is one point of critique of the new movement and the church to address here. Why will we march and protest when officers shoot unarmed black people, but we will not march, protest, and create a mass movement around the vast levels of black on black murder and gun violence that happens? I know that this question often is a conservative talking point to divert the discussion from the reality of racism and police brutality. But there is some truth in this question that the church and the new movement must address. This is a big subject and it is possible that it can be a catalyst for understanding and dialogue.

The new movement offers a different leadership model, one based upon the inclusion of women and the LBGQT community. The truth is that the leadership style of the new movement is much more collaborative than the generational leadership styles of the past. The black church must come to the table as a collaborator, as an equal with all others, willing to learn, teach, listen, and speak. If the church, because of its traditional role of leadership, attempts to exert control and dominance, then the church will find itself the only voice at the table. If the church tries to seize the mic, the agenda, and the publicity with celebrity preachers, young people will interrupt and disrupt the agenda.²¹ In truth, if the church presses conservative doctrinal positions in terms

²⁰ For more information on Bishop Joseph W. Walker II's ministry, see <http://www.fullgospelbaptist.org/bishop-joseph-w-walkers-biography/>.

²¹ See Matt Laslo, "Al Sharpton is Struggling to Control the 'Black Lives Matter,' Movement," *VICE Media* December 18, 2014, accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.vice.com/read/al-sharpton-is-struggling-to-control-the-black-lives-matter-movement-1218>.

of homosexuals and women as a litmus test of who can be included in the conversation and who can exert leadership, then the church will not be held relevant.

What the church must do is learn the value of coalition building and working with people even if there is disagreement for a greater goal. I recently went to a play entitled, *April 4, 1968*, and heard this phrase, “we disagree on the same side.” What is important is that we are on the same side and not that we agree on every doctrine or tactic. The vast array of the tools of systemic oppression requires coalitions to address issues and concerns. There is no one group, church, or generation that will defeat these forces in and of themselves. We must build coalitions despite differences of opinions in matters of doctrine, style and taste, and even tactics. There are congregations that openly affirm homosexuality and others that do not, but throughout this continuum the church must be inclusive with others who have the same community interests at heart. There is always a faith-filled minority that leans into the moment of movements of social justice, and the determination of those who participate has never been based upon gender and sexual preference. Though in the civil rights movement, there were issues of gender and inclusion of homosexual people, the new movement simply makes explicit this truth: come as you are.

Finally, it is no secret that the church lags behind in methods of social media. The issue is so obvious that it is not necessary to spend much time on it other than to suggest that the church not adopt these methods without understanding how they have changed communication. As we said before, social media flattens hierarchies, flattens governance processes, and builds deep consensus. Anyone can send a text and post a message to be hip and “keep up with the young people.” The deepest issue, however, is how to share information with transparency, and build consensus for movement. Many churches use social media to brand it, connect with audiences, members, and others that value their ministry offerings. Churches use it to build consensus among the members and potential member audiences. The question here remains, Can the church use its present social media networks to build consensus in the interest of building movements to help the community gain access to quality public services and schools, effective policing, jobs and a vibrant economic base?

Taking the Long View

In the concluding section of this article, I want to take the long view and offer suggestions as to how the church can offer further value to the new movement. My hope is that this article has created a level of understanding such that Millennials would find their voices in church communities. In truth, we need partnerships that involve the creative energy and bold determinism of young people and the wisdom, experience, and longevity of the older crowd. There are many lessons that the church can learn from the new movement, and likewise numerous lessons that the new movement can learn from longevity and historical sweep of the black struggle for freedom and justice in America. The truth is always relevant and relevant for both generations.

One truth is that racism and oppression is deeply embedded in the American experiment. History has taught that each time blacks have made strides for freedom, there has been backlash, retrenchment, and new forms of subjugation that appear on the American landscape; thus the old oppression gains a new guise. The new movement is part of a long historical sweep, and it has taken many lifetimes to get to this point in the struggle. Because of the tenacity of opposition to equality of race and economics in America, we cannot “throw the baby out with the bathwater” by looking upon past struggles and tradition with disdain. Past struggles have involved sacrifices

and deaths to make possible the dignity and respect of African American people. How many sacrifices and what deaths will it take in the new movement, in the words of King, to make America what it ought to be? The truth that is relevant is that we honor those in any generation who sacrifice and lay down their lives for freedom.

Another truth that is always relevant is that social justice movements must be deeply connected with sources of spiritual enrichment and vitality. The mystic and social justice advocate, Howard Thurman, noticed a kind of despair particularly in those people who work for social justice and improving social conditions. Many activists recognized that what they were doing was good, true, and significant, but they were working against the way things fundamentally were in life. This caused a kind of commonly shared despair. Human beings, for example, are fundamentally selfish, and to improve things, people are asked to be unselfish, to be concerned about someone outside their group, and consider other persons as their sisters and brothers. And even if we demand freedom from the perspective of power politics of numbers and economic strength through boycotts, the entrenched forces of opposition mutate and find ways to maneuver and to co-opt the movement and the progress made. The truth is people who struggle for freedom can never let their guard down. The struggle for freedom is an eternal vigilance. Those who work for justice come to know the real depth of human nature and the entrenched forces against freedom and justice. Thurman was aware of this truth, and considered it susceptibility to despair.

The relevant truth here is that in the face of such potential for despair, we need spiritual resources to escape the fall into cynicism and radical violence. The new movement is finding and creating its own spiritual resources. For example, some speculate that the new black national anthem for Millennials is Kendrick Lamar's "Alright." During a Black Lives Matter protest in Cleveland, protesters were chanting lyrics from "Alright": "We gon' be alright! We gon' be alright." Aisha Harris says about "Alright":

The chorus is simple yet extraordinarily intoxicating, easy to chant, offering a kind of comfort that people of color and other oppressed communities desperately need all too often: the hope—the feeling—that despite tensions in this country growing worse and worse, in the long run, we're all gon' be all right. And more than that—the specific kind of comfort that comes from repeating that line over and over.²²

"We gon' be alright! We gon' be alright." Harris says that she listens to the song because "the world seems like a terrible place." Hearing the news of another black person shot by police, a young girl's birthday party turns into an unnecessary horrifying police encounter! A white supremacist murders black church members during a prayer session! In each instance, she says she turns on "Alright." "We gon' be alright! We gon' be alright." The truth is the church and the older generations also know repeating sounds, songs, and insightful slogans give hope in seemingly hopeless situations. The truth is that chants of Lamar's lyrics sound like a remix of "We Shall Overcome."

Actually the full lyrics are: "But if God got us – Then we gon' be alright." Reports are that Kendrick Lamar is a Christian and several of his songs have Christian lyrics. Perhaps in a

²² Aisha Harris, "Has Kendrick Lamar Recorded the New Black National Anthem?: Singing 'Alright' in a Summer of Protest, Despair, and Hope," *Slate Blog*, August 3, 2015, accessed November 20, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/08/black_lives_matter_protesters_chant_kendrick_lamar_s_alright_what_makes.html.

very different way, hip-hop gospel, the church may provide spiritual resources of hope to those who struggle for a new world. I believe the church can be relevant if it pushes deeper and deeper into the bigger subjects with real honesty. When we deal with the truth, Millennials and the church will find they have a tremendous amount in common. The truth is always relevant.