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# Protests Over Social Injustice: A Christian's Perspective on the #Blacklivesmatter Movement

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Researching the active protests stemming from the death of George Floyd is an important step towards understanding why the protests matter to our society. People by the thousands have come out and protested, and they have various reasons for showing up. Most importantly, there are multiple races who participate with just as much conviction as any other race, including African Americans. This article will examine why the protests are so diverse and why the fight for African American social justice is not only important to the African American race, but to the Caucasian race as well. Christians have to take a stand against social inequality to ensure the hope for peace does not fade into antiquity. Christians have something to offer to the #Blacklivesmatter movement. We have a unique perspective on peaceful protesting that can be an example to others. This article will discuss what Christians can do to join in the fight for social change without confusion over whether or not we belong in the struggle.

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## Introduction

The current protests for social change mirror the struggles of the past in that once again African Americans are standing with other races to let their voices be heard. But unlike the protest movements of the past, the #Blacklivesmatter protests of today are being heavily attended, and sometimes organized and led, by Caucasian Americans. The #Blacklivesmatter movement has morphed into a multi-racial, multi-cultural movement that is fighting for equality for African Americans. The protest for social justice is a continuing struggle for equality in America, and that struggle is shared by Christians and non-Christians alike. The protests show that people of all backgrounds and beliefs can work together if they have a common goal. While observing the #Blacklivesmatter protests I witnessed people who follow Christ stand with people who do not, with like minds marching with one voice shouting, "Black lives matter." According to God's teaching, we are the Church and this is the example the world needs to lift up not only the people of the world, but the Church as well. Unfortunately, not all Christians believe in protesting for social change, but there is a significant link between protesting and the

people of God. A link that is not hard to find in both the Bible and in history. As Christians we are the light of the world, and now is our time to stand up and teach the world how the Church overcomes evil.

## Caucasians and the #Blacklivesmatter Movement

On July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, I attended a demonstration in an area of Atlanta called Cabbagetown. Cabbagetown is known by the locals and is famous for its artistry which lines the streets of the neighborhood. When I arrived at the demonstration for #Blacklivesmatter I was greeted by a scene of all White protesters. I have to admit I was surprised to not find a single person of color at this demonstration. To my delight, not long after I arrived a Black woman showed up and walked right up to me. She was known by the other participants and they greeted her with smiles and laughs—and an offering of home-grown tomatoes. I was the obvious outsider, so I was greeted as well by this very friendly woman and she told me she was happy to see me. It wasn't long before more people of color showed up and joined the rest of the protesters. It appeared to me that this was a community protest, held by the community for the community. Everyone knew

everyone and there were cars driving by honking in support. Music was playing as they stood on the street corner holding up signs and raising their fists. The same woman as before came up to me and saw I didn't have a sign, so she gave me hers with a smile and a thumbs up. I wasn't planning on participating in the demonstration, I was only going to observe and record, but I didn't want to be rude, so I accepted her sign with a smile. For the next hour I held up that sign and sang and danced to inspiring music blasting from their boom box. All the songs had a meaning of unity and were really good to dance to. I saw when I looked around, all the protesters were dancing and enjoying themselves. Most of the protesters were middle aged and older women, there were very few men in attendance. It was my impression that this protest was organized by one of the neighborhood clubs, so when it was promoted the news went through the women and not the men.

The longer I stayed, the more comfortable I felt. Then I heard a song that made my eyes bug out in surprise. The name of the song was 'Ebony and Ivory,' by Paul McCartney and Stevey Wonder. The moment I heard it I looked at the other protesters and started laughing. They immediately started laughing with me. We danced and laughed as the song played and I felt like this protest was more for the community's healing than for yet another demonstration to make the nation aware of the problem. Through an interview with a participant, I discovered that this corner, where the protests were being held, is down the street from the police station from which officers were dispatched to the Wendy's where Rayshard Brooks was killed. The lighthearted nature of this protest demonstrated how different races can come together and stand for equality even close to the scene of a tragedy.

I was told by the woman who gave me the sign that this protest was organized by #Blacklivesmatter. But when I asked another woman, she told me she was the one who put the protest together. She was an anthropology major herself, and after retiring from a career in social work she couldn't just stand by and do nothing. She wanted to get involved, so she started #BLM on the Corner. A group of neighbors gather every weeknight and protest on that corner. She continued to say, "at first there were only three, but at one point we had up to 30 people show up." I was impressed with her determination, thinking she must be sacrificing to bring awareness to the cause. But then she said, "these nights are the highlight of my day!" I didn't blame her, I looked around and saw people

holding signs and dancing to the music. It was beautiful, and as I fought back tears I realized just how much I wanted to be a part of such a close community. I felt so much emotion, while thoughts of all the racist remarks ever directed at me every time I was left out because of the color of my skin filled my mind. All those emotions swelled up, and I was so happy to be standing next to people who were on my side. The protest only lasted an hour, but that was the most fun I'd had in weeks. It was hard to leave these wonderful people, and as I left the parking lot, I said a prayer that their effort would count for something. This protest was organized by a majority White group of women that wanted the community to know it was okay for Caucasians to stand up for their Black neighbors.

### Cabbagetown Protest





On August 1<sup>st</sup>, I found myself headed back to Georgia. Georgia was where the majority of the protests were. The protest I attended was in a very up and coming part of town called Sugar Hill. As I waited in my car for the protest to begin, I realized the people present are mostly White men. I walked up to the small gathering and sat down on a bench over to the side of the building. I was greeted by the attorney who was scheduled to speak and the woman who organized the demonstration (both African Americans). As I was sitting there, I noticed the people who were standing around were talking about what is happening in the world. A White man started talking to the Black attorney and their conversation caught my attention. The White man talked about the history of White elitism and how White people are educated to think that what they have, they have worked for; that we are all equal, and if you have more it's because you worked harder than anyone else. He made a good point, saying White Americans are not taught to see themselves as a group, they are taught to be individuals. That way they can skirt their responsibility for the past crimes committed by the Caucasian race. This man is an atheist who believes religion gets in the way of having a scientific conversation with people. The attorney was a Christian, and even though I was a fly on the wall in this situation it was interesting to see these two men, seemingly on different sides of an important issue, come together and agree that unity is key for change.

Before we reached the end of the march, I started talking to a Jewish couple who arrived late. They were interested in the project I was working on and asked me why I was studying the protests. I told them I wanted to know what was bringing people of all races out to protest and why they believed this time would be different from protests of the past. It seemed to fascinate them, and they received my answer with

bright smiles. They were well intended people who had gone to the early protests in Los Angeles. "The riots were scary," they said, and they were glad to participate in a peaceful protest. I agreed with them, after leaving a peaceful protest you feel more accomplished and better about yourself.

### Sugar Hill Protest

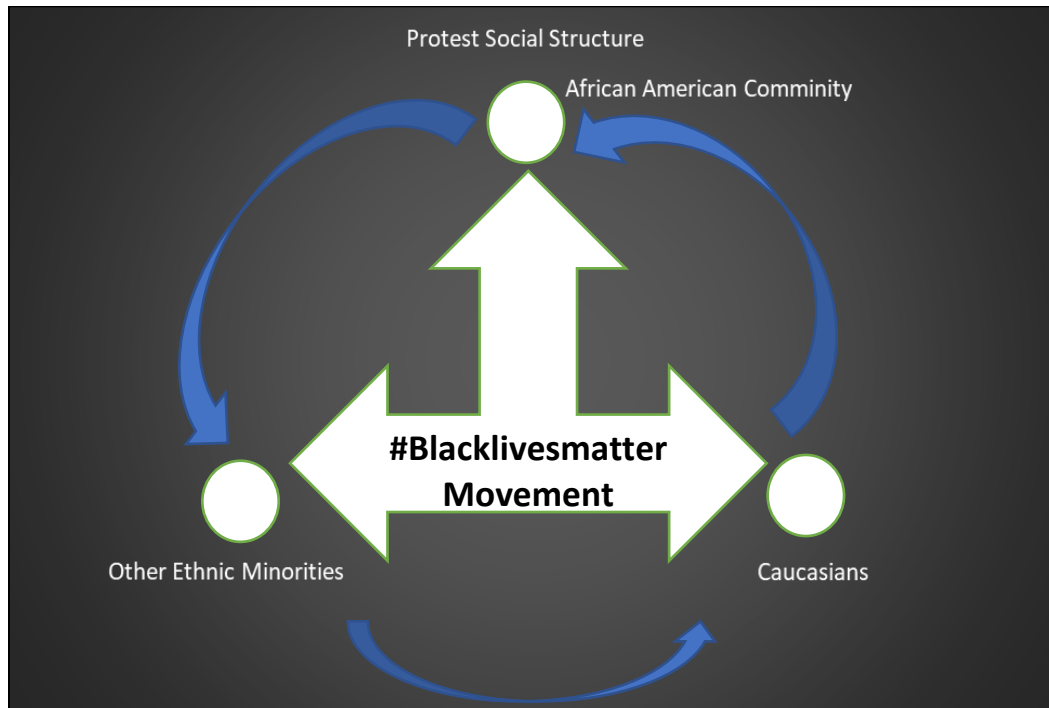


The people I had observed were from all walks of life. From young college students to the elderly, all wanting to make their voices heard. There were families with little children, all protesting together trying to make a difference in any way they could. And from those observations, I had noticed the protests have developed into a quasi-kinship phenomenon that has spread across all ages and races. Whatever differences they may have had prior to the #Blacklivesmatter movement have been pushed aside to accomplish their common goal. Having a common goal brings a kind of kinship and a sense of comradeship and friendship between the participants. From observing the participants while they are marching together, one can see that no one stands alone. The experience of people feeling the same emotions,

speaking the same language, and looking for the same results, draws individuals together to stand as one. As you can see from the diagram below, the movement is

comprised of the African American community, other ethnic minorities, and Caucasians, all working together for a common cause.

### Multi-ethnic and Multi-racial Support for the #Blacklivesmatter Movement



From my observations I have also noticed the chant is one of the unifying symbols of the protests because it unites the crowd. People who are complete strangers take the first step and speak the words, “Black lives matter.” Then, all the crowd is united in one cause and one language. The language matters and is repeated at every demonstration. The chants, “no justice, no peace” and “say their name,” are also staples in the social justice movement, and for a reason. The chants are the common thread that binds violence against Black minorities to the Black Lives Matter movement. That is why they have been used at every demonstration I have attended or seen on TV. From my observations, no matter what group organizes the protest, they all use the same language for the march.

From what I observed at demonstrations and from my interviews, the language is also an expression of the pain that is driving the movement to continue beyond the interest of the press, and this movement has a lot of pain to bear—not only for African Americans, but for Caucasians as well. The pain of African Americans

is seen through the tears of those who have lost a loved one to police brutality and from those who hurt for the families as well. I don’t know an African American who hasn’t been touched by racism, so when you hear of another Black person who has died or been beaten due to racism, I know from personal experience that the pain is felt by all Black people, not only the ones it directly effects. Unfortunately, pain is what binds all African Americans together.

But, I have observed that this movement has gone beyond the pain of African Americans. All races are seeing our struggle and responding with pain of their own. Many Caucasians have come to not only know but acknowledge the pain of African Americans. This is why the turnout at the protests is so diverse, at times dominated by a multi-racial crowd. Caucasians have come out in large numbers to support the Black Lives Matter movement, at times more fiercely than the African American community. At the protest at Sugar Hill, I noticed more Caucasians showed up than African Americans, and I believe that is what upset the



organizer the most. The Black community drove by and honked their horns in support but didn't come out to march. It was a similar scenario in Cabbagetown. The demonstration was a majority White gathering, and again the Black community drove by in support, but did not come to help demonstrate. However, another protest I attended at Johns Creek, Georgia had a majority African American crowd, so a conclusion could be that the diversity of the participants depends on the area in which you have the demonstration.

But I believe the matter of who comes out to participate in demonstrations is more than demographics; history also plays a role. According to their municipal websites, Cabbagetown was founded in 1881, Sugar Hill in 1939, and Johns Creek was incorporated in 2006. Areas with rich histories and backgrounds of White dominance carry the load of their predecessors' racist beliefs—generations of a mindset to silence the African American voice. So, even now when Blacks are demographically significant, it should not come as a surprise that the Black communities of these cities do not believe their voices will make a difference. They are all located in former slave states. And from my interview with Nin, I found out that Cabbagetown was the area where the White community lived when the town was founded. From what I observed while I was there, the White community wants to live in unity with the Black community, but the history of the town is getting in the way. Members of the Black community still do not feel comfortable coming to the White dominated demonstrations. I believe they need to do this so that the pain can be replaced with another emotion, love.

From what I observed, emotions ran high at all the protests I attended, whether they were peaceful or not, whether they had a high turnout or not. The people who take the time to come to the protests are serious about what they want from the law makers. For instance, the councilman from Johns Creek wants healthcare reform, along with education and criminal justice reform. Ade from Cabbagetown wants the police to lose their legal immunity so they can be prosecuted. Zai, whom I met at a protest in Atlanta, Georgia, says he and his organization, the Community Movement Builders, also feel police are treated differently when they commit crimes, and wants to see police funds used to create an alternative option to calling the police when there is a problem. Even though Zai sees non-Black participation in #BLM protests as a distraction, both he and Ade (who is a

White woman) have proven that common ground can be reached if two different parties on the same side stop and listen to one another. Despite their different backgrounds, they agree that the police should not be given legal immunity. This is the unity needed to end social injustice in our country.

The Councilman was one of the older people I interviewed, and he seemed to want to encourage the young people more than anything else. He mentioned he was around to witness these same protests 40 years ago and he didn't want the young people of today to lose hope. In December 1979, a man by the name of Arthur McDuffie died from being beaten by police. Six months later, when four White officers involved in McDuffie's death were found not guilty by an all-White jury, thousands of Miamians took to the streets, sparking unrest that led to 18 deaths (Pinsker 2020). This happened in the Councilman's time, but it reminded me of the Rodney King beating by police, which happened in Los Angeles in 1992. Then too, the police involved were not convicted, even though they almost beat him to death. Fury over the acquittal—stoked by years of racial and economic inequality in the city—spilled over into the streets, resulting in five days of rioting in Los Angeles (Sastrey & Bates 2017). Even though the attack had been caught on camera, the police were still released without consequences. This is why Ade from Cabbagetown believes that police should not be given immunity; the threat of consequence needs to be implemented to make officers think before they act.

I discovered a reference on YouTube to the Rogersville #Blacklivesmatter protest I had attended by a reporter named Jeff Bobo. While listening to the crowd on Bobo's recording of the Rogersville's protest, I heard a man say, referring to how the town was run, "This is a good ol' boy system." A "good ol' boy" is a White Southerner who conforms to the values, culture, or behavior of his peers. This mindset gives organizations like the police and our political leaders the idea that as long as they stick together they can get away with anything. This is the comfort zone that needs to be eliminated in our society, but a tradition that is so imbedded in our social reality will not be removed easily. From the perspective of an African American living in the south, this form of comradery is decades old and the ones that use it do not want it to go away. The fight to change the social norms of our country on this point is a movement for equality for all, instead of privilege for some. To succeed, the tradition of privi-

lege, for the police and for White people generally, will have to be reevaluated.

Noam Chomsky has tweeted, “The more privilege you have, the more opportunity you have. The more opportunity you have, the more responsibility you have.” People of privilege normally have greater platforms to voice their opinions and greater opportunities of influence. So, it is only natural to believe that the level of influence warrants a greater degree of responsibility to advocate for the common good of all. This is why it is so important that Whites be involved in the Black Lives Matter movement. But privilege can also mean, in the words of the sociologist and activist DaShanne Stokes, “not knowing you’re hurting others and not listening when they tell you.” This kind of privilege is especially hurtful when thinking of the families of the victims of police brutality who have pleaded with officers to spare their loved ones and were ignored. But this is also why the images of the protest marches of today are so important—images of different races standing together. The coming together of all races to stand as one voice against discrimination is a powerful statement to the privileged that all eyes are watching them, not just the eyes of African Americans, and to the underprivileged that their voices have been heard.

The participants in the protests that I interviewed had specific reasons for being there that were personal to them, but multiple people were there for the same reasons. Most couldn’t stand to sit at home and not help bring about the change they longed for. Some were so fed up with the brutality that they were seeing on the news that they had to act. The older generation wanted to encourage the younger generation so they would not give up the cause. And others wanted to show the law makers that there are hundreds of thousands of voters who don’t believe like they do. Whatever the reason, the people who attended protests were highly motivated and unyielding in their determination for social change. None wanted to give up and all believed in this new movement. It was John Lewis who said, “Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America” (Thome 2020). These are the words these protesters are standing on. A new movement, fueled by the past to make a brighter future for us all.

## Christians and Protesting

The group, Reconcile.com, partnering with Black Lives Matter, was responsible for a demonstration in Atlanta, Georgia on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Due to Covid-19 restrictions I was not allowed into the park. I had to try and find a shady spot on the sidewalk and listen from afar. The speaker focused on how this movement was different from the 60’s because all races and the church are coming together to stand against inequality. He was encouraging the people to take advantage of the opportunity God has given us and not go back to business as usual after the media has left. The message continued in this manner and was well received by the crowd. No one was here to cause trouble. In fact, it looked more like a church revival than a protest.

The language used at the rally was: freedom, peace through Jesus, prayer, unity. This language was different from other rallies and from what I had heard on TV, which was more like: stop killing us, no justice no peace, and fight—more angry and aggressive language than the language of the Reconcile group. The feeling of unity and hope was everywhere. I saw a mask that said, “Jesus is love,” which let me know that there is more than one way to protest for justice. After looking around for a while, I did notice that not everyone was expressing their feelings through Jesus. Children were wearing, “I can’t breathe” T-shirts, a message that I hope will cause them to realize the importance of these protests for the future.

While I was at a protest in Nashville on the Fourth of July, the crowd was chanting, “Black lives matter” and “no justice no peace.” This was something I had heard before, but the energy of the crowd made it new. There was no one to talk to during the march this time. Everyone was focused on moving and chanting, but I did find people on the sidewalk to talk to. Stopping to get a break from the heat, I was able to take a few pictures and have brief conversations. One was with a group of four young people who were resting on the sidewalk under a tree. The man in the group was a young Christian who wanted to express his outrage with the police brutality in our country. When I approached him and explained why I was at the rally he became excited and started asking *me* questions. He asked, “Do you believe the protests will last?” I told him since new cases are continuing to be found, which is fueling the fire, I don’t believe the protests will end any time soon. He agreed with me and added he couldn’t just sit at home and do nothing, that is why he

and his companions were protesting. After our talk, I began marching again with the crowd.

He later caught up with me and explained his church doesn't believe in protests. Even though they are the result of injustice, they don't support them. He didn't know how to talk to his congregation, and he asked me if I knew how he could talk to them. I felt a little awkward about giving a total stranger advice, but I could tell he was really upset about his situation and was looking for any kind of help. I thought about what I had learned in theology class when it came to having tough conversations with people who do not believe the way you do. I told him to begin by asking them a lot of questions and to try to find out why they believe the way they do. Then he might find a common ground from which to start a conversation. "You just need one thing that could help you have a beginning," I said, "then you can move on from there." After I said this his friends started calling him away, so we exchanged phone numbers and he said he would text me later so we could talk more. Then he went back to his friends. I don't know if he will actually text me or not, but I hope I was able to help him. Upon reflection I wish I had reminded him of the many instances of marching and protesting in the Bible. I believe having something to show his congregation would have made them think more about whether or not their beliefs were correct.

"The presupposition of all valid and coherent Christian thinking is that God has acted to reveal and effect his purpose for the world in the manner made known in the Bible" (Newbigin 1989, 8). There are moments of revolution in the Bible, where social injustice ruled, and with God by their side the people rose up and fought back, stories where injustices were overthrown by people who believed in righteousness and truth, and had beliefs that led them to act. There are people who question whether Christians should be involved in the protests. With so much violence being shown in the media, is protesting something that Christians should do? As I have witnessed in Georgia, protests can be peaceful and even Christian led. The very first protest I went to in Olympic Park, Georgia was organized by a Christian organization, and the demonstration was full of uplifting prayer and positive language. The world needs prayer *and* protesting, and as I have discovered through studying the Bible, standing publicly for justice is not against God's teaching. For instance, the march around Jericho was a peaceful declaration of the Israelites' victory over the people of Jericho. God gave the Israelites specific

instructions to follow, and if they obeyed his word, they would have victory. The act of marching was used for the purpose of awareness and intent by the Israelites. Marching outside the walls of Jericho the people couldn't help but notice the Israelites and acknowledge their existence; it forced a response. The Israelites were there intending on taking the city that was promised to them by God. They marched and demonstrated God's way. So, based on this Bible story, a peaceful demonstration for justice is not beyond the scope of Christian beliefs or practice.

When the Israelites left Egypt, that was a march for freedom and liberation, again led by God, out of oppression by the Egyptians, a mass exodus out of the city and into the wilderness because the Israelites longed for social equality. The struggle for social equality is something African Americans have dealt with for far too long. Even in our modern society, where I live African Americans continue to be looked down on and segregated against. It is a mindset that I have personally witnessed being passed down from generation to generation in the Caucasian families in my community. How else can such a representation of hate last throughout the years. "Reason does not operate in a vacuum. The power of a human mind to think rationally is only developed in a tradition which itself depends on the experience of previous generations" (Newbigin 1989, 8-9). It is as though evil has attached itself to entire households and the families can't or won't realize it is there. The citizens of Rogersville come to mind. They loved their history, a history filled with slave trade and slavery, but believed racism wasn't in their town. Yet, when they saw a White protester marching with the Black protesters, a man said, "you're on the wrong side," a statement he did not hesitate to make and, by the look on his face, felt absolutely justified in saying. I cannot say racism resides only with the social elite, because I have seen Caucasians of all economic standings that believe in White supremacy. The African American race has escaped the whip of their subjugators, but we are still not completely free of them. They continue to try and make us afraid and to strive for the privileges they believe they are naturally entitled to. The march is a peaceful way to express and acknowledge the need for change. Some choose to let God lead the way, and some do not, but even if they don't, I have found the cause is no less noble, and no less rooted in God's call for justice.

As a Christian I want to lead by example and show that unity can work. When like minds come together

something amazing happens, they become a congregation. It is human nature to desire to be around others that share your beliefs. As a Christian I am a citizen of the kingdom of God and that is a social journey. By studying the life of Christ, I have learned how to interact with people around me as a Christ follower. "A kingdom's subjects have a collective *interdependence* based on the policies of their king. The kingdom of God is a network of persons who have yielded their hearts and relationships to the reign of God. It flourishes as God rules in our hearts *and* our social relations" (Kraybill 2018, 18). At the demonstration in Nashville on the Fourth of July, Christians and non-Christians stood together to protest for human rights. As a Christian I wanted to show the love of God, so I decided to speak to the police that were present and not just pass them by, and I wore a Christian T-shirt that was surprisingly well received. Being around secular people is an excellent time to show how God would handle the situation. Even though the protest was peaceful, I could sense the tension between the protesters and the police by the looks on their faces, both sides assuming the worst of the other. Riots prior to the Fourth of July protest had police on alert since the protesters had destroyed part of City Hall. I watched the protesters move on by, which showed that even though they were angry with the police, they did not give in to the temptation of violence. As Christians we are supposed to follow God's example and live a kingdom life. Christians attending a protest with non-Christians are able to show a kingdom example and influence non-Christians in the ways of the Lord. Rooted in the deep love and abiding grace of God, kingdom people seed new ways of thinking and living (Kraybill 2018, 17).

In order to help Christians to understand where the protesters are coming from a confusion of their practices needs to be cleared up. The act of kneeling at the protests is a topic of debate in Christian circles. My pastor spoke openly of his feelings about kneeling at the protests. He felt kneeling should be reserved for prayer to God, not used as a practice in a protest for social injustice. "You have to be careful who you kneel to," he would say in his sermons. Then, he would continuously kneel during his sermon when he was talking to God, as if to give an example as to how it was supposed to be done. However, in my view, the act of kneeling in the protests was not in submission to another entity, it was a recreation of the act that took the life of George Floyd, and the two should not be confused.

George Floyd's death was a tragedy that showed how deep the racist emotions of some people can go. For a man to dismiss the fact that he was being watched and commit an act of murder in plain view of the public is discouraging and scary. "Floyd 'took himself to the ground' while handcuffed at 8:19 pm., according to the charge document. That is when Chauvin placed his knee on Floyd's head and neck area while Floyd was lying prone on the pavement" (Graves, 2020). Eight minutes and forty-seven seconds later, George Floyd was dead. Several protests I have attended and witnessed recreate this act of kneeling on the ground for exactly eight minutes and forty-seven seconds to remember what happened to him and to put themselves in the moment of his death. I did not participate in this action, but standing there with the other protesters I was still aware of the length of time that poor man had to suffer under the officer's knee. It was a powerful and saddening feeling waiting for the time to expire. It felt like I was waiting for hours even though it was only a few minutes.

The act of kneeling holds a significant meaning for Christians and all who love God, but the debate should not be about protesters using the act of kneeling in their demonstrations. It should be about this sacred act being used to murder someone because he didn't fit into someone else's narrow worldview. Many of the scriptures in the Bible that talk about kneeling have one thing in common, they all reference prayer or worship. Romans 14:11 (KJV) says, "for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.'" This moment is to be revered as precious and intimate, because at this moment you are relinquishing your pride and submitting to the power of God. Psalms 95:6 says, "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!" In the Christian community kneeling has special significance as part of our worship and honor to God. It should not be used to show submission to anything or anyone, because they would never be more worthy than our Lord. In that regard I can see where my pastor is coming from, and his kneeling during his sermons is his way of reminding the congregation of the importance of submitting to God. But as I said earlier, this is not the message the demonstrators are trying to convey. Being present at the protests gave me the perspective of a Christian in the middle of the demonstration, and I wasn't alone. I met several Christians that wanted to voice their outrage at the acts of law enforcement officers who abuse their authority and believe they are



above the laws of God and humanity. Many of these Christians chose to kneel along with their secular counterparts because the reasons for doing so were clearly explained by the organizers. The purpose was to recreate the last moments of George Floyd's life, not to replace the sanctity of our time of worship with our Lord.

From watching the news coverage, I can see how this protest movement has lit a fire in the people of America and across the globe. Why are so many people so vocal about the death of African American men and women? As the enemy tries to sow fear and hatred, our God is also moving the hearts of the world. Kat, a Caucasian woman from a protest I attended in Cabbagetown, became emotional with the first question of her interview. I asked her why she participated in the protests, and she immediately started to cry. Then she said, "because enough is enough." She told me her heart was broken at the pointless violence she saw on television. She is not the first non-minority to sympathize with non-Whites in their struggle with social inequality, but I do believe God has his hand especially on his own, the Christian community, and that he is proving love is more powerful than hate.

"Call to a Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom" is a report on the meeting Martin Luther King Jr. had with his inner circle before the Freedom March in Washington D.C. I reference this report because it helps us understand the link between protests and prayer. In advance of the march, King, Randolph, and Wilkins convened a planning session at Washington's Metropolitan Baptist Church (King, Randolph, and Wilkins 1957, 151). The men gathered to pray and to assure a peaceful protest against segregation and social inequality. As important as the march was for social change, the prayer meeting was important too. It showed the Christian beliefs of the organizers and how they decided to march with God and follow his lead instead of their own. It set an example for Christians who want to protest peacefully for social change without questioning whether they belong in public marches. "As we approach the third anniversary of the ruling of the United States Supreme Court against racially segregated public school systems," they wrote, "we invite all believers in the God-given concept of the brotherhood of men and in the American ideal of equality, to assemble, review the national scene, give thanks for the progress to date, and pray for the wiping out of the evils that still beset our nation" (King, Randolph, and Wilkins 1957, 151).

The demonstration at Olympic Park was more like a church revival than a protest for social equality. Three speakers at the demonstration prayed for the people and the families of the victims. It gave me hope to see so many people come to a Christian led demonstration. If you think back to the struggles for social equality of the past you can see a pattern of protest and prayer. In 1965, on Bloody Sunday, John Lewis met with close to six hundred demonstrators at Brown's Chapel before the march started. "I read a short statement aloud for the benefit of the press, explaining why we were marching today. Then we all knelt to one knee and bowed our heads as Andy delivered a prayer" (Lewis 1998, 337). I can see from my observations and the media coverage a spiritual war is raging in the hearts of the people, a war that began in ancient times and will continue to go on until the evil is removed from this world. Since Jesus is the only one who can accomplish such a feat, prayer is our best weapon against the wickedness of racism. Prayer invites God into the struggle and allows the people to rely not on themselves, but on the power of the All Mighty which insures victory. 1Corinthians 15:57 says, "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

### **A Christ Led Solution**

As an African American, I am devastated every time I see a news report of another Black man or woman killed by police. The situation has become so desperate that protests have been happening every day. Prayer is my solution to the social unrest of our nation. We need to bring God into the picture, or we cannot have hope of a peaceful ending. Isaiah 32:17 says, "The effect of righteousness will be peace." I have looked at the issues talked about in the interviews I had with protesters and now offer my reflections based on a Christian's perspective.

The councilman, whom I met at a protest in Johns Creek, Georgia, wanted to encourage the young people and remind minorities to vote. He believed this would bring about the change he wanted. But I believe the people of our nation also have to return to prayer, because this is how we are going to see real change. God can change the minds of the people in our neighborhoods as well as the law makers. The councilman was alarmed that the same crimes against Black Americans are happening now that happened 40 years ago. But I believe that this time is different. The world is different and God can change the minds of

those whose hearts were hardened in the past. A new awakening is happening in this country. Those who would undermine a better way of thinking about race can no longer live in the shadows. The wickedness in their hearts and minds are exposed for the world to see and sides are being taken. The time is *now* for God's people to speak up and minister to these people, encouraging them to listen to the Bible and become kingdom people. A kingdom person follows Jesus's example of forgetting about the self and focusing on uplifting others. The councilman did believe that with police reform there could be a coming together of Black communities and law enforcement. But I believe that coming together is going to take more than new laws; there has to be an understanding of pent-up emotions on both sides of the issue. Black Americans have gone on camera and asked, "Why?," with no response from law enforcement. No one is answering this question. Without understanding there can be no healing, and without healing there can be no coming together.

Nin, from Cabbagetown, Georgia, wanted to do more than complain about the protests, she wanted to actively push for change. She wanted new laws that would make it easier to stand against racism and bring awareness to the subject so people who say racism doesn't exist would have to face the facts about our country's society. She also wants our government to form a committee to address the antiquated laws of individual states so they can be done away with. I admire her courage and determination to see this movement through to the end. I would also remind her that she is not alone in her fight. God walks with all of us and he goes before us. With him the battle is already won, so we need to allow God to fight our battles for us. But this does not mean that we do not take action. Ephesians 6:11 says, "Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil."

I did not expect the emotions I felt while I was at the protest at Cabbagetown. There was a genuine feeling of belonging and joy when I was with those people. I prayed for their community because I wanted that feeling of joy to spread to the hearts of their neighbors. That was a community on the forefront of the conflict, since the police station that deployed the officer who killed Rayshard Brooks was from that area. I was happy to see the people have not fallen into despair and that they were open to voicing themselves without violence. It shows God is on the move and he is using his people to influence the hearts and minds

of the ones who can influence others in their community. 1 Peter 3:15 says, "but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."

Kat, also from Cabbagetown, is the one who became emotional while she was answering my question, why do you come to the protests? She was an older woman and she felt like she had been dealing with racial inequality issues her whole life. She wanted to finally see unity come from the protests. Cabbagetown is more proactive than other towns I have visited. They have community meetings where the local police have attended to communicate with the community. I suggest that during these meetings the religious leaders can also take the opportunity to reach out to the community and to the officers to bring about the unity Kat wants to see. Even if none of the attendees are Christians, a Christian perspective will be helpful in positively defusing the issues in the community. This is also an opportunity to educate police on the needs of the community and allow them to get to know the people they are policing. The point is to bring back the value of human life. Also, if you know the person you are about to kill, you will think twice before you pull the trigger. Mark 12:31 says, "The second [commandment] is this: 'You should love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." These words are a message to live by. If the people of this nation would take this message seriously then the unlawful killing of minorities would stop. It is worth asking ourselves the question, "What do you believe needs to happen for this problem to decrease or stop?" I asked this question during my interviews and Kat mainly focused on education of people and police and finding an alternative to calling the police for low-risk situations. Both are very good ideas, but unless the education involves a call to Christian love the lessons will be forgotten and we will find ourselves in the same situation again.

Clay, another resident of Cabbagetown, believed in numbers to bring awareness and change. Even though she was determined to bring awareness, she was not convinced real change would happen with this movement. She mainly wanted to let African Americans know that not all White people oppose #Blacklivesmatter and that there are White people that will support African Americans. Clay was hoping the demonstration would result in a greater voter turnout,

and that a new president would bring change and a new attitude in society. Social equity is the goal she is working for. The people of Cabbagetown are very dedicated to the #Blacklivesmatter movement, and they have come up with their own ideas on how to improve the situation. So, while Clay doesn't believe the change will happen this time, I believe it can. I have faith that this time will be different. While I was engaged in this research, the election occurred and Joe Biden is our new president. Change has already begun, and a new start is within our reach. After every election I always pray for the president and his time in office, and this time was no different. I appreciated Clay wanting to let African Americans know she was on our side, but one demonstration is not enough to touch the hearts of Black Americans. There needs to be ongoing interaction between all races to make a lasting impression. With their community meetings, Whites can make a point of inviting the minorities into their community. It's important to fellowship together and be seen with one another so a feeling of unity can be felt by everyone. Stand together, eat together, laugh and minister to one another. This paints a better picture of unity than just demonstrating while the Black community drives by and watches from a safe distance. 2 Corinthians 13:11 says, "Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you."

Ade, of Cabbagetown, feels a deep sense of conviction that what has been going on with the police and African Americans is wrong. Her brother is an officer of the same precinct that responded to Rayshard Brooks' shooting. Her family supports the police, but Ade doesn't believe the police need to be supported. She is protesting to defund the police and use the funds for mental health programs. Ade wants the police to be held accountable for the crimes they commit and their immunity to prosecution removed. From what I could tell, this is an issue that has not been addressed yet by her family. Improving police—citizen relations is essential for the healing process needed for social change. While listening to her speak I felt there was a missed opportunity in their routine. After every demonstration on the corner the protesters gather at Ade's house to discuss race relations and how they can improve. This would be a good time to not only discuss race relations, but to pray with organizers and participants. When you involve God in what you are doing it makes you feel like you are not alone in your fight. That can give people the push and the courage

to keep going. The small demonstrations like the one in Cabbagetown are just as important as the larger demonstrations. The small protests are more intimate, and the participants can develop relationships with one another. Praying with someone is a good way of getting to know them on a deeper level. If they are worried about their safety, you are going to know. If they are depressed from what they see on TV, you are going to know. These meetings can be used to strengthen the minds of the participants and develop quasi-kinship relationships that would give the movement the longevity it needs to bring real change. When I say real change, I mean in the person-to-person relationships between people of all races. Developing new legislation is good for the nation, but the people can change how they see and act around each other on a day-to-day basis. This is the change that can happen now, a change that the current generation can hope for, if they will put faith in more than the movement.

Zai, of Atlanta, wanted to bring change through a grass-roots organization with local people. He wanted community control with direct democracy. Through protests, the Community Movement Builders would gain the visibility he wanted to promote his organization. He was promoting liberated talk, community patrols, and self-policing through the demonstrations. He wanted an alternative to calling the police, and instead to have people who are experts in de-escalation respond. He was pushing to de-militarize the police and transfer the power to the people. Zai is prior military, and he compared what is happening with police tactics to what he experienced in Iraq. He viewed the streets a war zone.

He told me a story about what happened at his first demonstration. On that day, the people who showed up were from an anti-Trump rally that had happened earlier in the day. He spoke with enthusiasm about how the protest was disrupted by police who showed up to arrest one of the protesters. He had to wrangle the rest of the participants away and finish the demonstration. He referred to the incident as fun, as though it added a little excitement to the protest. Now, he works security for other demonstrations. His duties include, should the police turn violent, making sure people turn on their phone cameras and finding people who know first aid.

As he was talking, Zai recalled a protester that cursed out a police officer and threw things at them. He condemned his behavior saying, "that's not what we wanted that day." Rather, he advocates for controlled violence, that is, to allow violent protests as

long as they are planned. As a Christian I cannot condone violence of any kind. Conducting this interview was the hardest for me to do. Objectively, I asked my questions and allowed him to answer without any input from me, but internally I wanted to minister to him. I could sympathize and empathize with his point of view. Years of pain and mistrust have built up and the outcome is to distance yourself from what is hurting you. The protests give African Americans a platform to voice our anger and frustration at the cause of our suffering, but following the dark path of segregation will not give us peace. <sup>1</sup> John 2:11 says, "But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes."

Even if a self-governing community were possible, it is not the direction we as a people need to be going. The Community Movement Builders are in a position to move the people in either a positive or negative direction. There is nothing wrong with empowering the people, but human power should always be under God's authority and exercised according to his example of how to live and grow in our communities. Ephesians 4:29-32 says, "Let no corrupted talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." I want so badly for the people on both sides of this issue to be able to embrace these teachings and have the peace they are seeking. God has shown us the way, the question is, why can't we follow him? I believe tradition is what is getting in the way of God's path. African Americans have been taught to not trust officers from the moment they are old enough to understand directions. And now that police brutality has taken over the media, mothers and fathers of Black men are telling their children to be even more cautious of police. I pray for the Lord's protection every day. I teach my children to do the same, and we have been blessed because of it. Allowing God to take over your actions can start a new tradition of prayer, instead of passing down fear and mistrust.

The people of Georgia taught me a lot about social interaction. I spoke with African Americans that wanted to peacefully protest to voice their position on social inequality, but I also talked to African Americans who would choose a more violent option if it suited them. Both ways will get them noticed and I could understand why they would use them. When I was in Rogersville and was surrounded by people who didn't trust me because of the color of my skin, I was not able to contain my anger. I spoke out with intense emotions and wanted everyone to hear what I said. I used my anger not to provoke anger in others, but to make others acknowledge me as a human being with feelings. It was Aristotle who said, "Anybody can become angry—that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not within everybody's power and is not easy."<sup>1</sup> Gamson's study has proved that violent protests can have a greater effect on achieving your goals:

Gamson argued ([1975] 1990) that violent social movements are more likely to achieve their goals than nonviolent movements. Analyzing data on American social movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Gamson argued that movements employing strikes, violence and other disruptive techniques are more able to draw attention to their goals, impose costs on political incumbents, and ultimately achieve their goals than movements using non-disruptive techniques. (Rojas 2006, 2148)

Yet I do not believe this is the way God has taught us to demonstrate. When you add violence to a protest, you provoke violence in others.

By the examples in the Bible, peaceful demonstrating is something I know God approves of. The key is making God the center of the movement. When you do that, you always have hope of success. You can rely on his word to get you through the times when you feel your message is not being heard. As humans it is so easy for us to take over and believe that because we are involved, we need to take control, especially when we are personally invested in the outcome. But the movement for social equality is bigger than any organization. We need help from the one who can go before us and pave the way for our victory. This is the message I would give the members

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Art of Rhetoric*. See <https://philosiblog.com/2013/08/07/anybody-can-become-angry-but-to-be-angry-at-the-right-time-and-for-the-right-purpose-is-not-within-everybodys-power/>. Accessed 7/26/21.

of the Community Movement Builders. I can tell they have a lot of dedication in their organization and they only want to protect the African American communities of our nation. But they are not looking at the big picture of the social equality movement. Isolating Black Americans in their communities is not going to make them safer than they are now. All races need to come together. If we can stand together under God's authority, we will have peace with justice because both will come from God.

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