
POWER-FULL BLACK BODILY RESISTANCE: REIMAGINING KAEPERNICK'S PROTEST THROUGH KING'S NONVIOLENT DIRECT ACTION

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Abstract

In 2016, Colin Kaepernick chose to kneel in protest rather than stand when the flag was presented before NFL football games. His actions prompted strong and varied reactions from many people and groups. This essay presents his protest within a tradition of black bodily resistance and patterns of white racist response. This paper interprets Kaepernick's protest in terms of the nonviolent direct action of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and will argue that it is a cruci-centric ethic in nature. Furthermore, this paper makes the case that white Christians should not remain silent or condemn the protests, but rather they should support and act in solidarity with Kaepernick's actions because of the cause behind them.

Introduction

“We would present our bodies as a means of laying our case before the local and national community.”¹ Even though he was responding to criticism of his involvement in the protests in Birmingham from white clergy, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words are as relevant today as they were in 1963. On August 26, 2016, in a San Francisco 49ers NFL preseason football game, Colin Kaepernick chose to sit on the bench during the playing of the National Anthem and the presentation of the U.S. flag. He sat in protest to the racial injustices of unarmed black people shot

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¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter From a Birmingham City Jail” in *A Testament of Hope: Essential Speeches and Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. by James M. Washington, (New York: Harper One, 1986), 291.

and killed by law enforcement, witnessed by the nation via cell phone recordings posted on social media, and reported in news outlets. Each weekend, Kaepernick expressed his protest without hesitation. Before long, teammates and other players across the league joined him in solidarity. The protest even extended to collegiate and high school games when young black athletes, male and female, followed suit.

What is most alarming is the condemning rhetoric, even death threats toward Kaepernick,² coming from conservative Christian circles with no regard for the reason behind his protest: the pattern of racial injustice associated with policing the black community. One white Evangelical pastor burned his Nike sneakers in front of his congregation as an act of protest against Nike signing Kaepernick to an endorsement deal.³ Many white football fans vowed to protest the games in which athletes protested by either not attending in person or not watching on television. Social media posts were filled with hate-filled comments about Kaepernick, and often those authoring the posts were Christians.

This paper will argue that the witness of black bodily nonviolent resistance, as instituted by Martin Luther King, Jr., and modeled by Colin Kaepernick, is a cruci-centric ethic intended to confront systemic racial injustice in the form of policing black bodies. This ethically based protest affirms black selfhood. Furthermore, white Christians should participate in solidarity with this ethic of resistance rather than responding with condemnation or indifference.

History and Significance of Black Bodily Resistance

To appreciate the significance and necessity of Kaepernick's protest, it must be placed in its broader context. Considering the history of black bodily resistance, his kneeling demonstration re-memembers the legacy of black resistance to the mismanagement

² Carol Kuruvilla, "Here's What Many White Christians Fail To Understand About The NFL Protests" www.huffingtonpost.com, September, 28, 2017.

³ Lee Moran, "Alabama Pastor Destroys Own Nike Gear During Anti-Colin Kaepernick Sermon," www.huffpost.com, September 12, 2018.

and maltreatment of black bodies at the hands of white people. One must interpret the protest in the context of the exploitation of black bodies for the sake of white economic prosperity, beginning with the enterprise of slavery in the antebellum South and continuing to the modern-day prison industrial complex. The ancestral witness of protest reverberated on the NFL pregame ceremony in the last two seasons, disrupting the symbolic and economic interests involved in pro football.

I draw from Jason Young's definition of *resistance* as "any method that seeks to disrupt oppressive and dehumanizing systems of injustice."⁴ Historically, black people have used their bodies to resist racial injustice because for the most part, this was their only weapon.⁵ They lacked the resources for other forms of resistance; decision-making power, economic power, and political sway were token at best.

New Testament scholar Love Sechrest defines the term *racist* as "any behavior or attitude that perpetuates group hierarchy" and the associated power dynamics inherent in cultural and structural racism.⁶ I draw from her definition as well.

Kaepernick's blatant form of resistance continued a long history of black bodily resistance. African slaves propelled themselves off of slave ships as a means of liquidating European slave "inventory." Enslaved Africans took their own children's lives so that their bodies would not be subject to a life of dehumanizing servitude. Henry "Box" Brown literally mailed himself to freedom in a box; in a sense, he confiscated human equipment (himself) from southern slave owners.⁷ Harriet Jacobs hid her body from her slave masters

⁴ Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African American Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry* (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 12, Kindle Edition.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Holt Street Baptist Church," William Sellers, YouTube.com, (February 3, 2012), www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGtp7kCi_LA (accessed December 16, 2018).

⁶ Sechrest, Love. "Race and Identity in the New Testament," lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, Calif., January 18, 2018.

⁷ Vincent W. Lloyd, "Introduction," in *Race and Secularism in America*, eds. by Jonathan S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 16, Kindle Edition.

in a small compartment in the house for seven years.⁸

Kaepernick's actions were the reverberations of the nonviolent demonstrations of the sit-ins and the Montgomery Bus Boycotters as his body too became an instrument of active defiance rather than one of passive acquiescence to racial injustice. His protest—both in the form of sitting and eventually kneeling—is woven into the fabric of American history in the long black fight for recognition of “being,” and the right to not just exist, but also to thrive equally with whites in U.S. society.

Kaepernick's bodily protest also must be interpreted in view of white perception of black bodies. Young, in *Rituals of Resistance*, reminds us that according to racist ideology, “Ideally, slaveholders regarded the slave as but a body, a vehicle for labor and capital accumulation.”⁹ Calvin Warren in *Ontological Terror* agrees with Young in his critique of how black being was and still is treated as nonbeing. He argues, “[B]lacks are introduced into the world as available equipment in human form.”¹⁰ He adds, with weightier words, “Blacks have function but not Being...metaphysics is obsessed with both blackness and nothing, and the two become synonyms.”¹¹

The nonbeing of blackness did not just validate mistreatment of black bodies but also demanded their individual and collective suppression of emotions in response to racial injustices. In other words, nonbeing is not supposed to have emotions and it is not expected to feel; thus, it is not allowed to resist in protest. The systems built on black nonbeing and founded on white ideological underpinnings—whether African colonialism, American slavery, segregation, or mass incarceration—malfunction when blackness assumes the agency inherent to its being-ness and begins to resist actively.

⁸ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Lydia Maria Child, (Overland Park, Kans.: Digireads.com Publishing, 2016), 9, Kindle Edition.

⁹ Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 13, Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2018), Loc. 201, Kindle Edition.

¹¹ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, Loc. 186.

Further, black bodily resistance is black *being-ness* strategically asserting itself through the use of black bodies—posturing, assembling, fleeing, and even naturalizing—to embody noncompliance or noncooperation. Considering *posturing*, we may look to Kaepernick’s kneeling protest as an example. His predecessors Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised black-gloved fists in the air for the “Star-Spangled Banner” during the medal ceremony after their event in the 1968 Olympic Games. They, too, were protesting racial injustice in the United States. *Assembling* is the gathering of black bodies in marches, sit-ins, and the like as a form of public demonstration. *Fleeing* refers to black people’s attempts to escape slavery as well as the Great Migration to the North during the Jim Crow era. Lastly, *naturalizing* refers to the embrace of black natural selves (hairstyles, flaunting black curves, or wearing Afro-centric clothes) that resist counter efforts of assimilation to white culture.

What is it about black bodies postured in resistance to racism that evokes a response of condemnation rather than compassion or solidarity? The conundrum of white backlash or apathy long predates marches, sit-ins, and kneeling protests. The image of a black body kneeling in white spaces receiving hostile responses is not a new phenomenon. It has always undergirded and many times found its way to the surface in American life.¹² At St. George’s church just outside of Philadelphia, in 1786 African American attendance “grew numerously.” One Sunday morning while kneeling in prayer during the service, the Rev. Absalom Jones and others were forced to get off of their knees, as they were not allowed to kneel and pray in that section of the church. They were told, “You must get up—you must not kneel here.”¹³ Those sentiments echoed across social media and news outlets more than 200 years later when the bodies of black men growing numerously in wealth kneel in white

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where Do We Go From Here?,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 556.

¹³ Richard Allen, “Life Experience and Gospel Labors,” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* 2nd ed, ed. Milton C. Sernett, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 146, Kindle Edition.

spaces. Those black bodies in that Philadelphia church in 1786 were removed and blackballed, just as Kaepernick was.

Many white people have historically responded by trying to intimidate resisters into silence or obedience. Slaveholders often punished recaptured slaves and slaves who were attempting to escape by whipping them in front of the other slaves. Another tactic has been to mischaracterize resisters as thugs, troublemakers, or criminals as has been the case with Black Lives Matter participants. Lastly, another response has been to change the narrative altogether. Interpreting Kaepernick's protest as disrespect for the American symbols and the military camouflages the real cause for his actions.

A telling 2015 study by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) reveals that although sixty-three percent of white Americans are in favor of Americans expressing their right to protest because it makes the country better, only forty-eight percent of white Americans are in favor of protests by black people.¹⁴ Furthermore, "Even those Christians who agreed that the players' free speech should be protected admitted that they didn't think protesting the anthem is the 'best way' to advocate for justice."¹⁵ Jerry Taylor of Abilene Christian University asserts:

The nonviolent message that a Black man can do with his own black body what he pleases has always drawn violence and white violent protest out into the open from the shadows. It is... a form of crucifixion in that the black body is publicly crucified because the black body in a very public way spiritually confronted the spirit of racism by refusing to show reverence to a sacred symbol that has been ritualized in a way that subconsciously shows honor and respect to a system founded upon the demonic spirit of racism.

¹⁴ Daniel Cox and Robert P. Jones, June 23, 2015, "Most Americans Believe Protests Make the Country Better; Support Decreases Dramatically Among Whites if Protesters are Identified As Black," prri.org, 06/23/2015, accessed December 17, 2018.

¹⁵ Kuruvilla, "Here's What Many White Americans Fail to Understand About the NFL Protests."

Kaepernick is therefore crucified as a blasphemer that dared declare his religious allegiance to a God that is in direct opposition to America's god of civil religion.¹⁶

Black bodily resistance forces the nation to see itself in ways it has been unable or unwilling to do. It challenges white Americans isolated from the daily suffering of racial injustice to notice the tragic implications of a racialized society. Narratives can be controlled and altered by those in positions of power. However, visuals of the powerless suffering in real time have the capacity to concretize and dramatize the crisis for everyone who is willing and able to notice. King expresses this idea when he quotes Mohandas Gandhi, "Things of fundamental importance to people are not secured by reason alone, but have to be purchased with their suffering.... Suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears which are otherwise shut to the voice of reason."¹⁷

Womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland in her book *Enfleshing Freedom* asserts, "The body is a site and mediation of divine revelation...[it] provokes theology."¹⁸ The body has the capacity to make visible one's pain and suffering and should arouse in humanity thoughts and questions about the who, what, where, and why of God's being and will.

I would add that black bodies, when properly understood in the context of the black experience in the United States, should provoke a *cruci-centric* theology.¹⁹ Katie Cannon makes the analogy between the crucified body of Jesus and the suffering bodies of black people in the United States. James Cone makes a similar comparison in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, linking the lynched black bodies to the body of the suffering Christ hanging from the cross. He challenges how one must see both black bodies and Christ. He says:

¹⁶ Jerry Taylor, email message to author, January 4, 2019.

¹⁷ King, "An Experiment in Love," in *A Testament of Hope*, 18.

¹⁸ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2010), 2, 7.

¹⁹ Katie Cannon, "Foreword," in *Enfleshing Freedom*, x.

Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a “recrucified” black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy.²⁰

To further Cone’s analogy for present-day relevance, today we must see the bodies of black people, “the least of these” slain at the hands of white citizens or law enforcement, as the body of Christ on the cross. While Cone calls us to a cruci-centric vision of black bodies, we must also envision and have an appreciation for the cruci-centric ethic of black resistance. Black bodily resistance against anti-black racist structures for the liberation of black people will encounter suffering and pay a cost. In this sense, it is analogous to the visual of the marginalized God-man crucified publicly as part of the divine plan to resist evil forces and liberate humanity.

Kaepernick’s Motivation and Social Location

At the onset of his protest, Kaepernick appeared motivated not only by ancestral methods of protest but also by his faith and his conscience. Former sports writer-turned-Lutheran pastor, Angela Denker, quotes Kaepernick as saying, “I think God guides me through every day and helps me take the right steps....When I step on the field, I always say a prayer, say I am thankful...and try to glorify the Lord...”²¹ It was not until after the game in a locker room interview that he shared the motivation behind his actions. He gave his reasoning behind his protest and showed his understanding of the times, the history, and the crisis at hand: “This country stands for freedom, liberty, [and] justice for all and it’s not happening for all right now.”²²

²⁰ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011), Loc. 187–202, Kindle Edition.

²¹ Angela Denker, “Colin Kaepernick and the Powerful Religious Act of Kneeling,” September 24, 2017, www.washingtonpost.com, accessed January 10, 2019.

²² Colin Kaepernick, interview by NFL Network, San Francisco, Calif., September 2016, www.nfl.com, accessed January 5, 2019.

It is important to note that Kaepernick lived a life of privilege before and during the events surrounding his protest. He was a biracial child who was adopted in Wisconsin by a white couple and was raised with their white children in California.²³ The privilege that Kaepernick was afforded did not immunize him from racial epithets and mischaracterizations based on his appearance with tattoos and cornrows. However, Kaepernick was insulated from the day-to-day profiling and brutality often associated with living in urban contexts. His social location and access to resources provided him a level of privilege that many African Americans have not been afforded. The police shootings seen on news outlets and social media pricked his conscience and sparked an awakening for Kaepernick that led to the actions he took and that later cost him his career.

Privilege such as Kaepernick's does not protect him from potentially being a victim of police racial bias. For example, NFL football player Michael Bennett was mistaken for a criminal in Las Vegas. He filed a complaint stating that he was wrongfully chased and received unnecessary physical treatment while being wrestled to the ground by police officers, who relented once they learned he was a professional athlete. Dr. Henry Louis Gates, a Harvard professor for more than twenty years, was arrested for trying to enter his own home when a neighbor called the police on him. When the police arrived, he was already in his home, yet the police still did not believe him. Actor Ving Rhames in 2018 experienced a similar encounter with police when a neighbor called because they suspected he was a burglar. James Blake, a former world-ranked tennis player, was assaulted by undercover officers in New York in 2017 and wrestled to the ground until it was determined to be a case of mistaken identity. If these famous, wealthy black men are still susceptible to racial profiling and assumed guilty even in the sanctity of their own homes, then how much more will ordinary black men experience the threat of criminalization and brutality on the streets of their respective cities?

²³ Martenzie Johnson, "Colin Kaepernick's Parents Break Silence: 'We Absolutely Support Him,'" December 10, 2016, <https://theundefeated.com/features/colin-kaepernicks-parents-break-silence-we-absolutely-do-support-him/>, accessed April 5, 2019.

Cruci-Centric Ethic

A cruci-centric ethic embodies Christ-like suffering for the purpose of dismantling injustice for the sake of the vulnerable and marginalized. As a cruci-centric ethic, black bodily resistance mimics the actions of a Spirit-led, Spirit-filled Jesus. Jesus functioned by the power of the Spirit, confronting evil for the sake of human liberation. Jürgen Moltmann says of the events around the cross, “God is totally invested in the finality of the life and death of God’s creatures here and now. Thus the cross is the sign of God’s own commitment to human dignity.”²⁴ The suffering and death of Jesus freed humanity from the debt of sin and from the tyranny of death. The cross restored God’s originally intended, uninterrupted fellowship with human beings (Genesis 2). Christ’s body was the instrument of resistance to death, sin, and evil. His body was positioned on the cross as one seemingly powerless in surrendering to power, yet his power was on full public display for those with eyes to see. The suffering Christ was the liberator of humanity, doing all the will of God by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, with his body as the primary instrument.

In Kaepernick’s protest, he used his body in a nonviolent way to resist forces of evil and agents of injustice for the liberation of others. Several theological motifs undergird his protest as a cruci-centric ethic: it is self-sacrificial/solidaric, sacramental, and redemptive.

Self-sacrificial/Solidaric

Kaepernick’s protest is *self-sacrificial and solidaric* for the liberation and protection of black bodies. By *solidaric*, I simply mean action that is characterized by solidarity, being in agreement with and support of another. Solidaric protest lays down one’s privilege, presenting one’s body as an instrument of protest for the liberation of those who are oppressed. The model is Jesus as the God-man who took on human flesh and ultimately suffered for, with, and *as* humanity. Samuel K. Roberts writes in *African*

²⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, “Introduction” in *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1984), Loc. 85 of 2622, Kindle Edition.

American Christian Ethics:

African American Christian Faith has appropriated a vision of Christ that has undergirded the quest for full liberation as human beings. Such a quest has been viewed as consistent with God's will that all God's creatures be privileged to actualize themselves to their fullest capacity without constraint by adverse forces.²⁵

Invisibility is a primary barrier to a self-sacrificial/solidaric ethic. Invisibility, consonant with nonbeing, characterizes the black experience in the United States. In "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., highlights the dangerous implications of rendering one's neighbor unseen when he preaches on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. The rich man did not enter heaven because of his apathy toward the poor man Lazarus who came to the rich man's gate each day hoping for food to eat. King says, "He [the rich man] went to hell because he allowed his brother to become invisible."²⁶ A cruci-centric ethic compels one to not only see his or her neighbor, but also to give of one's self in the face of certain suffering for their benefit; for reclaiming the value in the personhood of the oppressed.

Sacramental

Colin Kaepernick's protest was sacramental—an outward sign/symbol of an inner spirituality. Howard Thurman in *The Inward Journey* calls to our attention the "sacrament of remembrance [where] we bring them (those whom we love deeply) before our own minds and our spirits and we *tarry in and with* [emphasis added] their spirits."²⁷ Kaepernick's posture of kneeling is such a sacrament of remembrance. Outwardly it is an act and a symbol of noncompliance, and inwardly it is deeply spiritual; to use King's

²⁵ Samuel K. Roberts, *African American Christian Ethics*, (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 67.

²⁶ King, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," in *A Testament of Hope*, 274.

²⁷ Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey*, (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1971), 122.

term, it is “other-regarding” love. A sense of the sacredness of public resistance to injustice joins the agency of the privileged and able-bodied within the black community to the voiceless bodies within the black community. A Eucharistic practice is at play, a communion with other human beings and with God. Ideally, it should enjoin non-black Christians to also stand (or kneel) in defiance of even the slightest forms of complicity with a racialized system.

This sacramental practice is reminiscent of the spirit of the Samaritan man who undoubtedly had to get to his knees in order to mend the beaten man’s wounds and then lift him up upon his animal. Likewise, in a metaphoric way, Kaepernick’s kneeling protest was tending to the wounds of and was uplifting to the collective humanity of black people who experience racial profiling and abuse. The protest is a sacrament as part of a broader liturgy of black suffering, grieving, and resistance in the face of perpetual reality of surveillance and death hovering over black bodies.²⁸

The poetic nature of the protest evokes an emotional response with both its beauty and offensiveness. The beauty for some is in the “somebody-ness” of black being, to which he calls attention. But the offense, for others, is in the noncooperation of a perceived malfunctioning “instrument” within the greater machine of anti-black racism.

The sacrament of black bodily resistance witnessed in Kaepernick’s protest is poetic and liturgical. It does not merely point a finger but provokes deeper thought regarding one’s feelings about racial injustice and one’s response to it. It is liturgical in that it is patterned and ceremonial. The kneeling protest is poetic, particularly in that moment of the national liturgy of football. It is intended to shepherd the nation to lamentation rather than celebration; it is collective lamentation that will conceive of the necessary prophetic action.

²⁸ Although black bodily resistance as a liturgical practice in the Black church/ community is beyond the scope of this paper, it is relevant enough to deserve mentioning.

Redemptive

Kaepernick's public bodily resistance is redemptive because it allows the most oppressed among us, who are generally the most invisible, to be seen. Visibility fosters awareness. Awareness is what the individual and collective conscience requires to participate in facilitating justice to establish or preserve shalom for the community. While the rich man's apathy toward his neighbor prohibited him from securing salvation, the converse is true for those imitators of Jesus in Matthew 25:31–46. Jesus casts eschatological vision and places salvific value on *seeing and caring for* the "least of these" with whom Jesus himself identified.

Christ was publicly executed as a religious troublemaker. Kaepernick's effort provoked from many in conservative, white, Christian circles a type of crucifixion as he publicly resisted the spiritual powers and human agencies of injustice. This type of crucifixion in God's economy is redemptive in that its suffering can be "transformed into a creative force."²⁹ It has life affirming potential for black selfhood, which has been synonymous with the "least of these" who experience humiliation, imprisonment, and generations of systemic racial injustice. It catalytically energized the community, continuing to affirm the dignity of black existence. It also inspired the agency of voiceless men and women not just to cry out in reaction to injustice, but to speak out and act out proactively in nonviolent ways.

In light of the documented history of the dehumanization of black bodies, Kaepernick's protest carries more implications than immediate resistance to racial injustice. Kaepernick's protest is reflective of self-management of a black body that is not in compliance with a system that mismanages black bodies to the point of their destruction.³⁰ Jesus' actions leading to the cross constituted self-management of his body. He says, "no one takes [my life] from me, I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:18

²⁹ King, "Suffering and Faith," in *A Testament of Hope*, 41.

³⁰ Vincent Lloyd, "Introduction: Managing Race, Managing Religion" in *Race and Secularism in America*, eds Johnathon Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 17–18.

ESV). Unbeknownst to those who were responsible for crucifying Jesus, his actions were noncompliant with the power structures but were consonant with God's will for redemption of creation.

Copeland says that racism "rests on the separation of humanness from body."³¹ Given this description of how racism functions in managing black bodies, Kaepernick's actions and other acts of black bodily resistance are redemptive for recovering the humanness, dignity, and function of black bodies as a force for black being rather than as utility for white enterprises.

Nonviolence, Kaepernick, and King

The philosophy of nonviolence was the foundation for Dr. King's method of direct action.³² Although it was not initially understood nor fully embraced, it soon became the backbone for a powerful social movement during the civil rights era and beyond. King insisted on a Christ-like method of resistance that was "nonaggressive physically but strongly aggressive spiritually."³³ In the emergent stages of the movement when the method was implemented, it was met with antipathy. Though it was nonviolent, it was an unwelcomed disruption to the order of things in the South.

King was confident that this approach was the way of Jesus, but the writing and witness of Howard Thurman and Gandhi further solidified his resolve. Though influenced by Thurman, King said, "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method."³⁴ At the center of this Christian-Gandhian method is love, the kind of love that does not participate with evil by compounding violence, as "violence solves no social problems."³⁵

King outlines six principles of nonviolent resistance that will be the framework by which to reimagine Kaepernick's protest. This paper will highlight the first five of the six principles as applicable for Kaepernick's actions: (1) while it is passive physically, it is active

³¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 107.

³² Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Power of Nonviolence," in *A Testament of Hope*, 12.

³³ King, "The Power of Nonviolence," in *A Testament of Hope*, 12.

³⁴ King, "An Experiment in Love," in *A Testament of Hope*, 17.

³⁵ King, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," in *A Testament of Hope*, 7–8.

spiritually, (2) it does not seek to defeat or humiliate its opponent, (3) it is directed at forces of evil rather than persons who happen to be doing the evil, (4) it requires a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation, (5) it avoids external physical violence but also the internal violence of the spirit, and (6) it is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice.³⁶ In “Letter From a Birmingham City Jail,” King also wrote about the creative tension provoked by protest. This, too, is relevant to Kaepernick’s protest and its effects.

Kaepernick exemplified a *physically passive and spiritually active* ethic. His actions were of such a nonaggressive nature that most people did not even notice that his protest began when he was sitting on the bench just one week before he began to kneel. After meeting with a veteran and former NFL athlete, Nate Boyer, Kaepernick agreed to kneel the following week instead as a sign of respect for military veterans. Boyer contacted Kaepernick after seeing his initial protest. While Boyer was disappointed by the protest, he recognized that when he volunteered to serve in the military, he was also protecting the right to protest peacefully. He suggested that Kaepernick kneel as a sign of respect for veterans who died for the freedoms enjoyed by the citizens. Kaepernick agreed. His sitting protest turned into a kneeling protest. He wanted to use his platform to shine a light on racial injustice, yet he did not want to offend veterans. It was not until the motivation behind his protest was made known that real controversy erupted.

Physical meekness and spiritual boldness were present in his actions. In the spirit of humility, he began by conducting himself in a way that did not draw unnecessary attention. He also did not attempt to impose his actions upon others. In spite of the public crucifixion, he was steadfast in his conviction. Ironically, Kaepernick’s kneeling, which became the controversy, was the single gesture that actually expressed respect for others—black people susceptible to police brutality and military veterans who fought for the country. He was not seeking, as King states, to humiliate

³⁶ King, “An Experiment in Love,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 18–19.

anyone, but rather to bring attention to injustice. In doing so, he kept his attention on the issue of injustice rather than on persons.

In spite of the acrimonious, anti-Kaepernick response, including death threats, he never devolved into violence of the spirit. He exemplified, as King stated in his Ten Commandments of Nonviolent Movement, a “refrain from violence of fist, tongue, and heart.”³⁷ His direct action followed King’s blueprint for an efficacious social movement.

Kaepernick embodied what King referred to as the extremism of Jesus’ commitment to love and justice.³⁸ He brought those tensions, insecurities, and fears to the fore in some people and eased them in others, accepting the likelihood of his own suffering. King’s love ethic is self-giving, liberative, and not contingent on reciprocity. This act of love involves suffering. To King, the suffering that is sure to accompany nonviolent direct action is redemptive. This suffering can be turned into a creative force against injustice.³⁹ Kaepernick’s nonviolent direct action is a modern-day cruci-centric example.

Kaepernick’s protest was paradoxical in accomplishing two seemingly contradictory ends. He caused tension, and at the same time he eased tension. He caused tension by disrupting a sacred American ritual. But he also eased tension because he put on public display actions that expressed his deep convictions in a composed, nonviolent manner. King might say this is an experiment in love because, “Agape is the willingness to go to any length to restore community.”⁴⁰

Nonviolent resistance seeks “to create such a crisis and establish such a *creative tension* that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.”⁴¹ Yet many still seem to miss the fact that while they are uncomfortable with Kaepernick’s actions, part of his function as a nonviolent resister, according to King, would be “the creation of tension.”⁴²

³⁷ King, “Why We Can’t Wait,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 537.

³⁸ King, “Playboy Interview: Martin Luther King, Jr.,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 356.

³⁹ King, “Suffering and Faith,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 41.

⁴⁰ King, “An Experiment in Love,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 16.

⁴¹ King, “Letter From a Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 291.

⁴² Ibid

Jesus was the master of creative tension. He purposefully used the Samaritan man as the heroic Christ-like figure displaying a cross-cultural love ethic in the parable that would have deeply shocked his Jewish audience. He created tension when he risked his rabbinical reputation by not affirming the stoning of the woman caught in adultery. Such action requires a man or woman of deep spiritual rootedness.

The tension created by Kaepernick exists between the realities of systemic racial injustice and allegiance to the symbol of American freedom and ideologies. The posture of kneeling forces the audience to choose where their allegiance lies: with justice for all, or with the mere symbol of the idea of justice. It forces one to see the contrast between the ideals of the symbol authored by white forefathers and the lived reality imposed upon black people that falls considerably short of those ideals. The tension exists in reconciling the two, or out of allegiance defending one over and against the other.

Kaepernick exercised nonviolent direct action by presenting himself in a position that rendered him vulnerable to the violent spirit present in opponents of his protest. Kaepernick and the athletes who joined him in protest exhibited no violence, but it was present in the vitriol that followed. It came from many quarters of the white community, from the Oval Office, and from the fans in the stadiums and in front of the televisions. Many eventually protested the NFL games while spewing condemning rhetoric as long as players knelt during the presentation of the flag. Profanity-laced commentary was hurled in the direction of the players, particularly Kaepernick, as well as at the NFL for allowing the protest to continue without penalty.

Reimagining Christianity

An important question related to the response of white people, especially white Christians, must be asked when black bodies lie dying on cold streets: what will whiteness do without its silence? King's words speak to us today:

I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership....In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro [black people], I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.⁴³

The response of white Christians toward the crisis of anti-black racial injustice is deeply troubling and in fact dangerous. Passion from white Christians to speak out against racism and act in concrete anti-racist ways is minimal; the silence about and participation in racial injustice are still as obscenely present as in decades past. "When forgetfulness or silence is accepted, the relationality of our being in the present is weakened and we are rendered ontologically insecure."⁴⁴ Apathy and silence provide a safe space for the maintenance of racism and allow it to flourish. Thus, apathy and silence about bigotry or racism in systems and structures is inherently racist.

The prophet Jeremiah rebuked the apathetic people of Israel because they saw and even participated in the injustice among them and falsely declared that there was peace in the land.⁴⁵ The prophet's rebuke reveals an analogous response of the conservative evangelical circles of the Christian church in the United States. The conservative church has been silent in response to racial injustice while co-opting the narrative around Kaepernick's protest. This suppresses the concern over policing in the black community and

⁴³ King, "Letter From a Birmingham City Jail," in *A Testament of Hope*, 299.

⁴⁴ James Hanvey, "Dignity, Person, and Imago Trinitas," in *Understanding Human Dignity* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2013), 225.

⁴⁵ Jeremiah 6:13–14.

falsely claims he targets and dishonors veterans. Just as the prophet demands the people of Israel repent by “amend[ing] their ways,”⁴⁶ so must white Christians repent collectively and publicly of their complicity. It is only through repentance that a new vision of the protest and the struggle against racial injustice can be reimagined.

White Christians ought to join black folks and embrace the Sankofa principle, to “return and get it.”⁴⁷ This African principle teaches that “It is in understanding who we were that will free us to embrace who we are now.”⁴⁸ What does this mean practically? What are we going back to get? A painful trek to the past is needed to redeem what was confiscated by racism. We must remember a community that has never truly been realized. We must together go back in honest reflection about the church’s complicity in racism and how the legacy of that complicity manifests itself today. We must go back and correct inaccuracies of our history as well as fill in the holes left by the dominant perspective of white historians who control the historical narrative. To redeem the Christian faith, we must go back as theologians to right the wrongs of heretical doctrine and harmful ethical practices.

Until our white Christian brothers and sisters are willing to execute this principle in their lives in solidarity with African Americans and other people of color, they will not be able to contribute to meaningful, sustainable societal transformation in the area of racial justice. In fact, they will be the agents of inertia against authentic progress. From the cruel history of the United States, we can draw lessons for progress, lest we risk repeating the past.

Drawing on King’s words in “Letter From a Birmingham City Jail” and current insights, there are four essentials for white Christians: new vision, lament, confession/repentance, and solidarity. *New vision* requires white Christians to be able to see the perpetual mistreatment of black bodies. They also must be

⁴⁶ Jeremiah 7:3.

⁴⁷ Joy DeGruy, *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Portland, Ore.: Joy DeGruy Publications, 2005), 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*

willing and able to see themselves in the black bodies that lie dead on the streets, or the black bodies that kneel in protest because of the deaths of unarmed black people, because all are made in the same image of God. King reminds of “the interrelatedness of all communities...We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”⁴⁹

Only thirty-six percent of white Evangelical Protestants believe black people are discriminated against, despite all evidence to the contrary.⁵⁰ White Christians must see beyond their blind spots and recognize the systemic racism that is pervasive in white institutions. New vision must be forged into the minds of white Christians that sees justice, particularly for African Americans, in the foreground rather than the background of American values and symbols. It must be a vision that de-centers white selves and brings black bodies and their experiences from the periphery of white consciousness.

For white eyes to envision themselves in black bodies requires a fresh alternative hermeneutical framework that allows them to interpret the black experience from beyond their dominant vantage point. White Christians must be willing to be “baptized,” immersing themselves in a heuristic experience to create new eyes in which to understand the poetics of Kaepernick’s protest and respond appropriately. Without this new lens, white Christians will render themselves nonparticipants in God’s progressive, redemptive move to “create in himself one new [humanity]” (Ephesians 2:15 ESV). They will knowingly or unknowingly disqualify themselves from the evangelistic project of solidarity that Jesus described in John 17:21.

The drama of the incarnation was an act of poetry not discerned by the majority of the Jewish leaders. White Christians risk repeating this tragic misinterpretation today and risk missing the opportunity to embody Paul’s exhortation in 1 Corinthians 12:26 to rejoice and suffer along with, “becoming as” the black community.

⁴⁹ King, “Letter From a Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 290.

⁵⁰ Kuruvilla, “Here’s What Many White Americans Fail to Understand About the NFL Protests.”

This new vision brings the opportunity to *lament*. King reminds us, “There can be no deep disappointment [i.e., lament] where there is no deep love.”⁵¹ Lament is the outward expression of the inward experience of sharing pain. Brueggemann in *Prophetic Imagination* writes about the aim of prophetic ministry when he asserts that “the numbness [i.e., apathy] is more likely to be penetrated by grief and lament.”⁵² The numbness that hinders the new vision can be further disrupted by the practice of sharing pain. The shared liturgy of communal lament can coalesce hearts and facilitate a change of mind and behavior.

In order to disrupt systemic/structural racism, white Christians must, in a spirit of *confession/repentance*, acknowledge structural racism, complicity on their parts where evident, and the unwillingness as a group to share power. King’s words about the church in his day are equally relevant in 2019: “The contemporary church is often a weak ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound.... But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring.”⁵³

Lastly, none of the previous steps are of any significance without the goal of *solidarity*. Solidarity entails the just sharing of human goods and those goods necessary for human life; it entails the ability to participate in society.⁵⁴ Solidarity transcending race and ethnicity is not something we must reinvent. We must live into it as it is an unfulfilled reality for the human race:

In terms of theology, we encounter here the reality of our solidarity which has both natural and supernatural dimensions. The natural dimension is that moral obligation which we owe every human being virtue of our common humanity. Supernaturally, it is the

⁵¹ King, “Letter From a Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 299.

⁵² Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 117, Kindle Edition.

⁵³ King, “Letter From a Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 300.

⁵⁴ James Hanvey, “Dignity, Person, and Imago Trinitatis,” in *Understanding Human Dignity*, 222.

communio [solidarity] which unites all humanity in some way to the Grace of Christ and is realized in the Church.⁵⁵

Solidarity is not just about standing with, but also about “becoming as.” From the incarnation, we learn this fundamental truth: God did not just stand with humanity, but God “became as” humanity (Philippians 2:7–8), taking on flesh to dwell among people (John 1:14), experiencing suffering (John 19), fatigue (John 4:6), and temptation (Matthew 4:1–11). God could have decided to stand with humanity in the mystery and invisibility of the Spirit, but chose to immerse God’s self in the human experience as one of us.

Solidarity requires a willingness to stand and even kneel with the black community. To become an ally against racial injustice, white Christians must risk alienation from family and friends, physical harm, and assault upon their reputations. Solidarity is the public evidence of the previous three tasks. These are the traits for a cruci-centric ethic for the ally joining in the efforts to dismantle structural racism.

Conclusion

Kaepernick’s kneeling protest was an effort to awaken the conscience of the nation about unjust policing of black bodies. His actions were Christ-like as he was willing to lay down his privilege as a wealthy black athlete in order to stand on the side of those mistreated under the burden of structural racism. Kaepernick’s protest resembled in principle and in action the nonviolent direct action methods of Martin Luther King, Jr. He refused to cooperate with evil both in the forms of apathy toward injustice or the retaliation that compounds violence.⁵⁶ He never compounded violence, but rather pricked the conscience of the nation using his platform to shed light on police brutality against black people. Kneeling as the flag was presented, Kaepernick aroused a spirit among the most self-proclaimed patriotic citizens of the nation and those both perceived to be and treated

⁵⁵ Ibid, 225.

⁵⁶ King, “Nonviolence: The Road to Freedom,” in *A Testament of Hope*, 60.

as the “least of these.” He contributed to awakening the nation as he himself woke up. White people are also called to wake up and participate in solidarity with this ethic of resistance against racism.