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Policing Black Communities

by
Xavier Pickett©

Often it is said that most of our Black men are behind bars. What seems to verify this claim is that I don't think I know a Black man who has not had some kind of run-in with the police at some point in his life, especially if he was "Driving While Black." If this is the norm, then are all Black people criminals deserving to be profiled? Are we naturally prone towards prisons? If no, then the question of the hour is why are the prisons predominately filled with Blacks? How do we account for this?

Background

What makes matters worse is that some do not know or care, or have forgotten, the significance of "the mass incarceration of black people in America [being] a real and present danger. About one in every 265 whites is incarcerated in local, state, or federal prison. By contrast, of the 36 million African Americans in this nation, almost one million of them are in prison; that is about one in every 36 black people who is behind bars somewhere in America. African Americans represent 44 percent of all incarcerated people in state and federal prison cells, yet account for only 13 percent of American population. Something is clearly wrong when the government's most effective affirmative action program is the preference people of color receive when entering not college, but the criminal justice system."¹

Even if you do not think there is a problem with our criminal justice system, you still must grapple with solutions that prevent the overwhelming augmentation of Black incarcerations. The book, *The Covenant with Black America*, suggests:

Racial bias in our criminal justice system has many causes—historical, political, and economic—but we know that any solution to the growing crisis of mass black incarceration must begin with focusing on how our communities, especially our youth are policed. Police are the entry point, the gatekeepers, of the criminal justice system. They make discretionary decisions everyday about

who is likely to commit a crime and who should be targeted by the criminal justice system; about who should be stopped, questioned, searched, and arrested. These decisions are made on the basis of individual police officers' life experiences—their training, their instincts, their prejudice and bias. And all too often, they are decisions informed by race. (74)

The Covenant with Black America

For the authors of *The Covenant with Black America*, the key to overcoming this crisis is to establish more accountable community-centered policing. In this model, the local police will be held accountable by the community they serve because current police oversight has not done much for the racial disparities in the criminal justice system. For instance, in the context of a nation that had a War on Drugs, racial profiling was more of a problem for Blacks because police looked for drugs primarily among them, which caused a disproportionate number of Blacks to be arrested, prosecuted, convicted, and incarcerated. (75) "This leads to more African Americans in jails and prisons, a fact that only serves to reinforce the false perception that blacks are primarily responsible for the drug and overall crime problem in the country. [However] studies across the country began to show that African Americans were two or three times more likely to be pulled over and searched, yet no more likely to be engaged in any criminal activity than white Americans." (75) Therefore, within such a context of poor execution of drug and tough-on-crime policies, overly policed schools, and hyper and hostile police presence in Black communities, an effort to make sure the police are held accountable by the community seems like a good and viable option.

Nevertheless, in the face of such adversities, *The Covenant* contends that the community can still get involved even on the individual level. Here are some of the suggestions:

Get to know the police officers who patrol your neighborhood; ask your local city council representative to host a neighborhood meeting to discuss local policy/community relations, talk to young people about how to conduct themselves if they are stopped or confronted by police officers; encourage your local high school to invite police in to get to know the students; if there is an incident of alleged police brutality in your community, join with neighbors and community leaders in demanding an investigation and appropriate action; and hold all leaders and elected officials responsible and demand that they change current policy. (82-83)

Furthermore, leaders and elected officials have a role to play in the following ways:

Recruit and hire community-conscious personnel; adequately train all officers in cultural sensitivity, racial profiling, and excessive force policies; proactively maintain diverse and effective police departments; create efficient oversight mechanisms; eliminate barriers to citizens' filing complaints against police; ensure a fair and thorough investigation of accused police officers; and collect, compile, and publish relevant statistical data on police abuse. (87)

An Anthropological Vision

While I do believe that the model of accountable community-centered policing offered by *The Covenant with Black America* can remedy some of the policing problems and the relationship the police have with Black communities, it still falls short of a truly long-lasting solution. A long-lasting solution is not to be found simply in accountable community-centered policing as *The Covenant* suggests, but in building community-centered communities. Of course, community-centered communities sounds redundant, but there are communities that are not constituted as a whole for the common good. Too many “communities” are really aggregations of individualists, begging the question of community altogether. I say this because in a very real sense, focusing on better policing tends to avoid dealing with a much more fundamental issue of actually being a true community.

For instance, it is often said that it takes a village to raise a child. However, the “village” of the Black community is no longer what it once was. It seems as though when there was more community involvement in the raising of kids, there were fewer policing concerns. But one question still remains: why is there so much truth to the statement about it taking a village to raise a child? *I would suggest that part of being human is to be what God has made us to be—covenantal beings. And to recognize ourselves as covenantal beings is to recognize that we are inherently community beings. In other words, it takes a village to raise a child because we are essentially village people.* This reality is a function of our being created in the image of God. If we are actually living out our true identity as God’s image, we cannot help but be centered in communities while seeking their restoration. You could say that human community (in a broad sense) is an expression of our humanity. To be human is to have an organic and intimate relationship with one’s community and surroundings. Isn’t this something we see from the beginning of creation with Adam and Eve and their relationship to the earth? This should not surprise us because they come from the ground. If my community is hurting, then I too should hurt because essential to being human is an inextricable connection between the *ground* of my community and me.

An Eschatological Vision

Furthermore, a truly community-centered community is a community that manifests God’s original intent in creation. It is a community that needs to experience the re-creation of the garden in our neighborhoods so that we become more eager reformers of our neighborhoods even while we still live on the “south side” of the new heavens and new earth. Therefore, our Black communities should be creational communities that create or breathe new life into the broken and depressed lives of many Blacks. That is what creation is all about. It is about putting things into their proper order. This is exactly what the Edenic community (garden of Eden) was all about and what needs to happen in the Black community if it is to be part of the garden that God is recreating on earth.

Keep in mind that the Garden of Eden was not taken care of by Adam and Eve alone. They tended it, but God, the divine gardener, was its creator and sustainer. He would not let the garden go down the tubes even after Adam’s disobedience because

God had a plan to restore and fulfill this community in an unimaginable way. God's plan of redemption goes far beyond better policing, because that cannot ultimately undo the evil in our communities and world. What creation, including Black neighborhoods, longs for is to be re-created by its Creator in order to experience the righting of all wrongs. There is great reason for Black communities, and all other communities, to be hopeful and take their neighborhoods seriously because the Creator God is already in the process of re-making our communities to look even more glorious than Eden.

An Ecclesiastical Vision

Central to God's cosmic redemption of creation—and thus of human neighborhoods—are the people of God in Christ. If our communities can be expected to experience lasting redemption, how can that not begin to be seen and felt in local churches? Churches ought to be demonstrating by word and deed that the Creator has a covenant with his creation that he will not break. That is to say, when things are looking like they are at their worst all around us, Christians can trust the Creator God who is the Redeemer God in Christ to keep his covenant and not to abandon our creational-communities without righting the wrong.

Since our Creator is the covenant God who has become one of us in Jesus Christ, he will be faithful to bring about covenantal justice to solve the problems in creation. Those problems include the injustices we do to one another, including biased policing that our communities experience. God's faithfulness to the creation covenant culminated in the death and resurrection of Jesus through whom God is righting the wrongs that stem from our sinfulness. If Black communities—men in particular—gained such a vision in their local churches, perhaps the men would not end up in prison as a result of trying to take matters into their own hands. With this vision, they would understand that God cares more than they do about the evil in their communities and lives, and that He sent His only Son to right every single wrong.

Xavier Pickett is the director of Reformed Blacks of America and can be reached at xavier@reformedblacks.org

¹Maya Harris, "Fostering Accountable Community-Centered Policing," in Tavis Smiley, ed., *The Covenant with Black America* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2006), 73. Subsequent citations are noted in the text with page numbers in parentheses.